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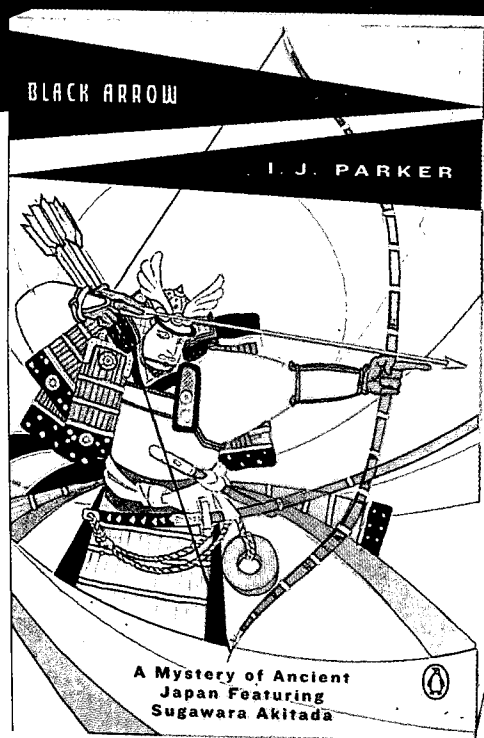


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*Cover by Michael Gibbs*

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# HAPPY HOLIDAYS

AND THANKS FOR 50 YEARS OF SUPPORT!



FROM THE STAFF OF AHMM

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# GUEST EDITORIAL

JAN BURKE

## THE CRIME LAB PROJECT

[www.crimelabproject.com](http://www.crimelabproject.com)

You see them on television every night of the week. They draw millions of loyal viewers and consistently rank at the top of the ratings charts. Forensic science dramas are hot. Students, picturing themselves leading lives filled with Hummers, high heels, and halter tops as they work in chrome-and-glass palaces festooned with high-tech equipment and futuristic holographs, are enrolling in forensic science classes by the thousands. But how do real life crime labs compare with their fictional counterparts?

*For ten years, the adult son of a woman in Arizona was missing. She received a call one day—his remains had been identified. His remains were found three months after he went missing but in a neighboring county, which did not receive the missing person's information from the county in which she lived. Over nine years passed before someone found the time to review the old case, years in which she suffered unspeakable anguish.*

There is a human price we pay for not funding our labs, one that can't be measured in dollars. Imagine this case multiplied by half a million. A Department of Justice study reported that U.S. crime labs faced backlogs (evidence unprocessed 30 days after being submitted to the lab) of over 500,000 cases in 2002. Most believe the number has climbed much higher in the years since that report was completed.

The vast majority of American forensic science labs and medical examiners' offices are housed in aging and inadequate facilities. They are understaffed, under funded, using outdated equipment, and are struggling to keep up with overwhelming workloads. According to a study by the American Society of Crime Lab Directors, one out of four labs do not have the computers they need to process evidence. Many labs lack adequate storage space for evidence.

*Because of staffing shortages, the Maryland State Police had not yet taken a sample of the DNA of a man convicted on a minor drug charge before he escaped from prison, even though several months had passed after he had been incarcerated. While a fugitive, he committed three murders, a rape, and four assaults before he was caught again. Had the DNA sample been taken and processed when he was first in prison, it would have shown that two years earlier, he raped and murdered two women—one 60 years old, the other 88—before being arrested on the drug charge and likely would have been held in a higher security facility.*

Backlogged cases are not merely units of work. They represent victims and their families left without answers, innocent people held in custody, the guilty free to commit other crimes against new victims. They represent unknown threats to public health and safety, compromised homeland security, and more.

Aware of this gap between reality and public perception, thousands



of crime fiction writers, readers, and other concerned individuals have joined the Crime Lab Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to seeking increased support for forensic science and to raising awareness of the problems and challenges that face forensic science agencies. We work closely with highly regarded forensic science organizations to ensure that we stay abreast of important issues and support legislation that will be the most effective in solving problems.

CLP members believe forensic science is worth funding and deserves greater backing. While we recognize that forensic science is not a miraculous discipline that can solve every crime, it can—and does—work wonders in many areas of our lives. We all know that in many cases it can help prove guilt or innocence. It can bring comfort and closure to the families of victims by helping to identify the dead, whether that be a missing person's lone skeleton found in the woods or one of thousands of remains found after a mass disaster. It can tell us if someone is too drunk to be operating a vehicle. Forensic science can help us to learn what has happened at a crime scene, or tell us why a seemingly healthy person suddenly collapsed and died.

Forensic science is also a vital part of national security efforts. It plays a key role in product safety. It allows a medical examiner to alert the Center for Disease Control to outbreaks of deadly disease and previously unsuspected causes of accidental deaths. It allows us to know if someone who wants to adopt foster children or work with our children at their schools has a record as a sex offender under another name. It can tell us if someone who wants to drive a truck containing hazardous materials or who wants a job at an airport has a criminal background.

It pays to have good crime labs. When labs process evidence more efficiently, we not only save dollars in potential losses of life and property, but also by helping detectives to carry out more accurate and speedier investigations, by saving the costs of continuing to keep someone in custody and delaying trials while awaiting evidence, and in many other ways. When crime labs are underfunded and inadequately staffed, we are also more likely to see the kinds of problems that result in lab scandals and costly lawsuits over lab errors.

Crime labs throughout the country are facing these problems. The difficulties are not limited to one region or a few states. Readers of crime fiction often resist this notion because we think we know how the system works. If someone we love dies unexpectedly, a medical examiner will be on hand to invest hours of investigation time and won't let any faint hint of wrongdoing escape his or her highly trained notice. Our police, we are sure, fingerprint everyone taken into custody and run these prints through a computer that will let us know if the suspect is wanted in Wichita for auto theft or in Brazil for terrorism. A DNA sample taken from a bullet found at a crime scene will produce a holographic image of the suspect within about ten minutes.

Sadly, reality is a far cry from this. A few more examples from recent news stories:

The fingerprint systems of the FBI, the State Department, and

Homeland Security are not currently interoperable. Many jurisdictions are not using automated fingerprinting systems at all and do not have the resources to be able to enter the fingerprints they take from suspects into the FBI's national database. In Kentucky, an audit showed that more than half of the 300,000 people arrested in the state in 2005 never had their fingerprints entered into state and national databases. In Iowa, a similar audit showed that 40 percent of the more than 4,000 people jailed in Des Moines were never fingerprinted. Recent stories of fingerprint backlogs have been reported in Florida, Massachusetts, and Missouri, and other states.

Although higher funding has been allocated to DNA in recent years—and it is sometimes funded as if it is the only form of evidence—DNA work is only about five percent of what labs do, according to the American Society of Crime Lab Directors. Still, no one doubts its value. Because DNA evidence is being gathered at far greater levels than before and states are expanding mandates for their databases, testing is increasingly backlogged. Many prosecutors feel lucky if DNA evidence is ready by the time their case comes to trial. This means that in many jurisdictions, DNA is not being used to *solve* crimes.

A severe shortage of firearms evidence examiners has contributed to under utilization of a new national database system and slows processing of evidence in many murder cases. FBI statistics show that firearms were used in 66 percent of murder cases in 2004. In one Texas lab, a single firearms examiner was responsible for processing evidence from 45 other counties.

In many jurisdictions the coroner needs no legal or medical background and may need only be 18 years of age and a resident of a county for a year. He or she may have less than 40 hours of training and be in the position of deciding whether an autopsy should be performed. Many are without computers of any kind for record-keeping. Forensic pathologists are in short supply and often overworked. Bodies may need to be shipped hundreds of miles away for autopsies, a process which may compromise evidence.

The CLP will be holding seminars and workshops throughout the country, and we hope you will attend one if we are in your area. Our Web site will give you information about our activities, as well as forensic science legislation, news, and needs. Sign up for our mailing list to receive information and updates. You'll find many of your favorite writers on our list of supporters.

Although we appreciate donations to the CLP and the CLP Foundation, membership in the Crime Lab Project is absolutely free, as is our mailing list and news list—all we ask is that our members take action, such as putting a link on a Web site or blog, e-mailing or calling congressional representatives to ask for support for key legislation, and speaking out about crime labs in public.

American crime labs need your help. Please take the time to visit the Crime Lab Project Web site, and to become informed about these issues, then join us in taking action to give forensic science the support it needs.

# EASY MONEY

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JAS. R. PETRIN

“Got to be easy money being a shy,” Moody said. “Loan it out, rake it in, get rich fast. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“Nobody wants to borrow from a shy,” Blue said.

“People do, though, all the time.”

“I don’t.”

“Sure, but that’s you. If you had to borrow money, if you had no choice, and if you had to get it on the street, the question I’m asking is, who would you go to in this town?”

Blue thought a minute. He took a swallow of beer, leaned back from the bar, and folded his arms across his hollow chest. Above his head, on the TV, the Yankees’ Derek Jeter caromed one off the Green Monster at Fenway Park. Below the TV, a timid soul poked his head in the street door for a look, thought better of it, and backed out again.

“In that case,” Blue said grudgingly, “I’d go to Skig—Leo Skorzeny.”

“Leo Skorzeny?”

“That’s the guy.”

Moody shifted on his tall stool, and it wobbled, the legs not quite even. The bar was the Rob Roy on Agricola Street. Moody had discovered the Rob Roy on the previous night, just a short walk from the station after arriving in Halifax on the train. He liked it immediately. The seedy look of the place, the hard-edged clientele, the way you could sit and let things drift or get into a conversation with someone you barely knew, like he was doing now. A place you could learn something.

But it was tough learning anything from Blue. Probably easier to pull teeth.

“So this Skorzeny, what kind of a guy is he?”

“What do you mean?” Blue eyed him guardedly.

“What kind of guy is he to do business with?”

Blue rolled that around a minute. “At one time, he could be rough.”

“How rough?”



"I heard," Blue said, "somebody told me this, Leo Skorzeny broke Jack Willimet's arms one time. This was because Jack got stuck after his wife dumped him—she was the money in that relationship, and when she took off, Jack didn't have squat. He missed some payments. Leo went around to his apartment and broke both of his arms."

"Interesting," Moody said. "A guy here in the bar last night mentioned something similar to that." He picked his beer glass up off the bar and squinted at it as if to make sure there was nothing questionable in it. "Some guy did business with a shy had a name like that, got in pretty deep, and got his legs broke."

"Couldn't've been Willimet," Blue said, "it was definitely his arms. I got it from Rico, runs the Tall Ship over there on Argyle Street, and he got it from a customer." He raised his hands to deflect a potential argument. "Could've been Skorzeny, though. Anyways, it wouldn't've happened if he'd paid back the money. If he'd done that, then he would've been fine."

"So you'd still go to this guy Skorzeny?"

"Leo? Sure. I probably would."

"Why?"

Blue raised his glass, swished the contents around, set it down again, hunched his shoulders.

"First of all, Leo's been around a while. He's a pretty old guy now. I don't know if he could break your arms if he wanted to. And because—the point I'm basically trying to get at here, if you wouldn't keep interrupting—they tell me he's sick. Guys on the street are saying he might not last long."

Moody lifted his face, sharply interested.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. That's the word. That he could kick off any time. Drop dead in his tracks. Some serious health problem he's got."

Moody said, "So your point would be . . ." He pushed his glass away, raised his eyebrows at Blue, teetered on the stool deliberately and expectantly a few times.

"My point is," Blue went on, "if you went to Skig for a loan, and he packed it in, then you might be able to walk away from it. It might be that easy."

"Nothing's that easy."

"No?"

"Come on. Even if the guy kicked off, you'd have to deal with somebody else. Somebody who took over the business. That's how these things work."

"If you say so."

Blue seemed to pull back into himself, his chain of logic derailed

and questioned. Across the room, someone shouted at the barman that if he didn't get quarters for the pool table, get them now, he was going to bust something up.

"Look," Moody said, more conciliatory this time, "I hear what you're telling me. But how do you figure it? How could you walk away?"

Blue took a sip of scotch. Cleared his throat in a superior way.

"I don't say you could, necessarily. I just say it might be possible. You got to know Leo. He's, well, kinda unique. He don't operate like most of them. He's got no partners, no organization. And since his wife died, no family either. There's nobody, far as I can see, to pick up the business if something was to happen to him. And if he's dying . . . well, you figure it out."

"So, he's always been like this? A loner?"

"He had a guy once, did the heavy lifting. The guy died. Cops were all over Leo, they didn't like the look of it, but they couldn't prove nothing, and that was the end of it."

Moody ordered another Sleeman. When the beer came, he drank a good long slug of it, set the glass down, and did some thinking. Finally he smiled. He seemed to have learned something useful, after all. He said, "So how long has this guy Leo got, do you think?"

Leo studied his businesslike visitor dispassionately, as if from a great height, his eyes half closed. The two of them were sitting at Leo's chipped and faded Formica-topped kitchen table. He knew why the guy was here. He worked for the Tuitte brothers. The brothers were out of Bar Harbor, two men Leo knew well, and he thought they were idiots. While the Bar Harbor guy talked—his name was Jakes, or something?—Leo poured himself another rye. The pain was bad again, down low in his gut. The pills helped a little, but the rye tasted better.

Mr. Bar Harbor, ignoring his own drink, finally got down to it: a proposition.

The Tuittes had learned, he said—he didn't say where—that Leo's health wasn't all that good. They wanted Leo to know they sympathized. They also wanted him to know they were pushing up the coast from Maine, buying out guys like him, and paying top dollar. They wanted to come to an arrangement. A cash deal for a flat-out takeover. As an incentive, Leo, if he thought he could manage it, could stay on as a consultant for fifteen percent net over a nonrenewable three-year term.

Three years, Leo thought. He should be so lucky. But let the guy talk. He had learned it was better to do that when a guy had been

storing up things to tell you. Let him run with it, get it out of his system, and he might say more than he meant to.

Léo had no intention of selling his business.

"You want to talk numbers?" Mr. Bar Harbor said.

"Sure," Léo replied. He shifted in his chair and winced, a pain with a fiery edge to it scissoring through his abdomen. His voice, which always had been rough, was huskier than usual to his own ears, and he cleared it with a *kek-kek* sound.

Mr. Bar Harbor had brightened, thinking he'd got Léo to see reason. He had a fashionable two-day beard, and his sudden grin made individual bristles stand out. A good-looking man. A wiry man. Probably jogged a couple of miles a day, worked out at a gym, did some martial arts. A guy with a stomach you could crack walnuts on. He looked comfortable in his twilled suit, a rich blue serge with an inch of brilliantly white shirt at his wrists. Léo wondered how many tables the guy had sat at, making offers like this to guys like him. Not many, he was willing to bet. The guy was too green. Too glib. He came across like a financial advisor.

From a secure inside pocket, the guy drew out some kind of fancy calculator, it looked like a calculator, which he switched on and set down in front of him with exaggerated care and precision.

"Okay, Mr. Skorzeny," he said, "we can talk numbers. You have a small operation here. Pretty much a one-man show. I'm going to guess you have a few hundred grand out on the street."

Léo sniffed; he had close to three million.

"Ordinarily," Mr. Bar Harbor said, "we wouldn't concern ourselves with an operation of this size. But like I said, we're expanding." He had picked the calculator up and moved it around delicately as he spoke. "What the brothers are trying to do is fill some gaps in their portfolio."

Léo, having a sip of whiskey, practically swallowed wrong. Portfolio! The guy had actually said portfolio!

"So they're buying in, up and down the coast. Large or small. Size doesn't matter. Sure, we could move in with direct competition, but then there'd be trouble. We know that. And we don't want trouble, it's bad for business. We prefer to keep things on the up-and-up so that everyone's happy, and no one gets hurt."

He let the veiled threat hang in the air a moment.

"Numbers," Léo prompted.

Mr. Bar Harbor put down his fancy calculator. He straightened his shirt cuffs.

"I was coming to that. We'd like to suggest a figure of, say . . ." He tapped the tiny keys of the gadget. "Say three hundred for the bones of the business, two hundred for the goodwill, for a total of



five hundred thousand dollars." For this he needed a calculator? It was ludicrous. "We buy up what's on the street, so you're not out anything, and we take on the collection of any and all related bad debts."

He sat there beaming.

"That's it?" Leo said.

"Well, yes. You get the consulting fees, if you want to go that route, you get cash back for what's on the street, and you walk away with an extra five hundred grand, nontaxable. Easy money."

Leo put down his glass. He folded his heavy arms. "And you'll walk away, if you can walk at all, with a broken nose and your teeth in a cup. Get outta here."

For a moment Mr. Bar Harbor seemed not to have heard him. He blinked a couple of times. He'd been crowding the table with that syrupy smirk of his, and now his grin soured. He leaned slowly back and drew in a very strained breath.

"Mr. Skorzeny?"

"Don't even bother," Leo said.

"Mr. Skorzeny, I came here in good faith. If the offer isn't rich enough, then I'm sure we can talk about it."

"We're all finished talking. Get your sorry butt outta here."

The guy opened his mouth, then closed it. He took the calculator in his hand. In a final attempt to make Leo see reason, he tried another left-handed threat.

"I'll have to report this to the brothers, you know."

"Big Toot and Little Toot. I know all about them. Tell them what they can do with their five hundred grand, and tell them next time they send someone to visit me, they better make it a real person, not a store window dummy."

Mr. Bar Harbor went pale. Something ugly flickered in his eyes, and his manicured hands tightened. He was a formidable guy. No fat on him. A guy who could jump a fence without breathing hard. Leo, on the other hand, was short, fat, and feeling lousy, and his fence-jumping days were over. But his upper-body strength hadn't left him, and he reached out with the speed of a cobra and clamped his thick stubby fingers over Bar Harbor's hand.

"You're not thinking of taking a shot at me, are you?" Leo said.

"'Cause if you are, that would be a mistake." He squeezed and saw the handsome face tighten. Squeezed some more and saw the sweat bead up on the unblemished brow. "If I throw you out of here," Leo told him, "I guarantee you, you'll leave by that window. You'll be asking the Tuitte brothers to cough up the scratch for a new face, not to mention a suit."

He gave the fist another squeeze, then let go of it, and Mr. Bar

Harbor leaped back out of his chair, stumbled, and dropped the calculator. It made a harsh clatter on the worn linoleum, beside the table leg at Leo's feet.

"My Blackberry!" Bar Harbor looked horror-struck.

"Your what?"

"My Blackberry."

"You mean this thing?"

Leo stepped on it.

Bar Harbor made an odd sort of strangling sound. He pointed a trembling finger. "You . . . You . . ."

"This piece of junk?" Leo said.

"I paid four hundred bucks for that machine!" Bar Harbor had found his voice, his rage shifting into second gear.

"More fool you, then," Leo told him, "I wouldn't give you a nickel for it." He stood up, stomped on the thing a couple more times, and kicked the remains into a corner.

Mr. Bar Harbor let out a feral snarl. His face twisted into a look of pure hatred. He brought his leg up like a kickboxer, pivoted, and lashed out at Leo with the edge of his foot. Leo saw the blow coming, grabbed the glossy black oxford in both hands, and gave it a sharp wrench to one side. At the same time, he gave a hard shove and then let go of Bar Harbor's shoe. Bar Harbor howled and lurched backward, almost ripping the phone off the wall with his arm.

He staggered to the door, fumbled it open somehow, and staggered backward out onto the stoop.

"You're crazy!" he yelled. "Crazy in the head!"

Then he was gone. Leo heard a car come to life in the side lot, with an aggressive, burbling exhaust, just the sort of car you'd expect a guy like that to drive. The engine revved wildly as the guy missed a shift, and then the tires dug in, the engine roared, and a spatter of gravel raked the side of the building.

Leo poured another whiskey and chuckled. He laughed, croaked, and wheezed until the pain in his gut made him stop.

Moody finally located the place. It stood on a corner in the first block of Railway Avenue, and now that he was here he wondered if he had got his directions wrong. Under the dreary orange light of a streetlamp, it looked like a real dump. More than that, it looked totally strange. Not somewhere a normal person would choose to live, never mind a guy who raked in mittfuls of cash. It appeared it might once have been an old filling station, with the pumps hauled away and the signs taken down. It even had the big roll-up door on the front of it, there at one end.

At a corner of the lot was a short stretch of fencing, heavy wooden posts with splinters jutting at odd angles, chain link bagging out between them. The rest of the lot was wide open to the street. A sparsely distributed spread of crushed rock, muddy pot-holes where the gas pumps might have been, weeds crowding in at the edges in the few places they could put down roots. The structure had a gray stucco facing. Tar paper showed through at one spot, as if a car had backed into it.

He had expected something more imposing.

His original idea, before talking to Blue at the Rob Roy, had been to find a shy, borrow some cash money—a few grand if he could get it—then jump a ship down there in the harbor and never look back at this part of the world. But learning from the guy that this particular shy was old and sick and alone changed everything. Since then, Moody had been rethinking things.

A shy would have a stash on his premises. That went without saying. He needed a bundle of ready cash on hand from which he could dole out loans to customers right there on the spot. How much he would have, there was no way of knowing. But a sizable amount, Moody was certain of that.

And where would he keep it? Well, that was another question. Probably a cashbox, a wall safe, or some such obvious hidey-hole. The shy would tell him.

Easy money.

With the plan taking on a whole new scope in his mind, Moody gave the dump one more lingering appraisal, then stepped off the sidewalk and began moving purposefully toward it.

Erwin Jakes had to use the hotel phone, since his Blackberry had been smashed all to hell back there. He was fuming as he limped back and forth in his room, brought up annoyingly by the telephone curly cord everytime he took a few steps. The Tuitte brothers had him on their speakerphones, down there in Bar Harbor, which made their voices sound as if they were speaking with their hands cupped around their mouths.

"You're telling us," Meryll Tuitte was shouting at him, "you let that five-and-dime chiseler throw you out?"

"I didn't exactly—"

"You go up there to speak for us, represent us, get results, and you let him treat you like that? It should'a been easy money. What's the matter with you?"

"Yeah, what's the matter with you?" The second voice on the line was the younger brother, Daryll—Little Toot tossing in his unwelcome two cents.



"It wasn't like that. Not exactly." Erwin hated to be on the defensive.

"Well then, what was it like?" Meryll Tuitte demanded.

"We talked. I gave him the whole spiel. I gave him your message exactly like you told me. Explained the buyout, the options, even did the math for him to make it simple."

"Easy money."

"That's what I told him."

"And you let him throw you out," Meryll said.

"The way it happened, he got the jump on me," Erwin explained. He knew how pathetic that sounded and added, "Besides, I didn't know how far I should go with him before I talked to you two guys about it."

"He didn't know how far he should go," Meryll said, this time clearly addressing the remark to his brother. The two had offices side-by-side in the Ritchie Building in downtown Bar Harbor: architects, chartered accountants, even a lawyer or two down the plush corridor. Erwin had never seen the brothers outside of their offices, had never even seen them together, or heard them talk to each other face-to-face. Meryll said, "Why don't we tell him how far he should go."

"He should go all the way," Daryll said. "And keep walking."

"Keep walking," Meryll agreed, "and not come back. He should be fired!"

"He is fired," said Daryll.

"You hear that, you loser? You're fired!" Meryll said.

They broke the connection.

Erwin Jakes looked at the hotel phone in his hand. Lowered it slowly to his side. He raised his head and stared out the window. Before him lay the city of Halifax, all lit up in a splash of white light. Lamps glowed in the windows of nearby buildings, red and green flashers winked out on the channel buoys, and there was a radiant glow from the streets of Dartmouth against the hills on the far side of the harbor. He closed his eyes and kept them shut for several long, painful moments. He had been humiliated by that fat old slob out there, a rare experience for him. And if that wasn't bad enough, he had now been canned. A thousand dollars, he had been promised, for expenses, and a three grand bonus for getting Skorzeny to play along. He was out four hundred bucks for the Blackberry, and his right leg felt as if it had been ripped off by a lumberjack and then reconnected by a diesel mechanic.

All that cash. He had been depending on it. And now nothing—nada!

The phone was making an annoying beep. Erwin Jakes put the

receiver in its cradle. He crossed to the luggage table, opened a small padded bag, and slid a serious-looking snub-nosed pistol out of an inner pocket into his hand. He popped the clip, inspected it, and snapped it back into place.

However he looked at it, somebody owed him. Owed him big time, and that was a fact. He'd pay another visit to Leo Skorzeny, only this time he wouldn't be blindsided. He'd collect what had been coming to him, and while he was at it, maybe award himself a nice, big fat bonus.

Leo Skorzeny was exhausted. He sat in his big, floral-patterned easy chair with the stuffing coming out of it, his face buried in his hands. He massaged his temples slowly and methodically with large, blunted fingertips. He had been sitting that way for several minutes. The TV was on, the sound down low, and from time to time he would peer blearily at it from between the spread of his fingers. An anchorwoman dressed like a Barbie doll was describing a six-car pileup on a Boston freeway. That's what life was, he thought. A succession of pileups. Big ones and little ones. They could happen at any time.

Another thing about life, it kept on coming. You got knocked down by it, and you got up again. You did what you had to do. You kept on going.

He shook another pill out of the plastic bottle on the table by his chair and swallowed it dry.

Mr. Bar Harbor would be coming back. Leo had no doubts whatsoever about that. Very likely he would come tonight, with a boot in the backside from Big Toot and Little Toot. He would come for any number of reasons, but mostly because he had lost serious face today, and to guys like the Tuittes and him, face was everything.

Leo switched off the TV. He reached for his whiskey glass. Found it empty and stopped himself from filling it again.

He had to eat something. He knew that. He hadn't had one bite since he'd got out of bed that morning. Hadn't even thought about it till now.

Maybe he'd wait till Bar Harbor arrived, and the two of them could order in pizza. He grinned at the wall.

At the kitchen table, he toyed with a plate of reheated macaroni and cheese. Best deal going. One box good for two meals, and he always bought the no-name brand. He didn't force himself to eat it; he liked it. In Leo's opinion, most food was overrated. Steaks, chops, who needed them? People could say he was cheap, it didn't bother him. He denied himself nothing. He simply wasn't interested in

material things, unlike that dope the Tuittes had sent around, the big business poster boy, with his suit and his calculator.

Leo knew the value of a dollar. Apparently, no one else did nowadays.

He forced down another mouthful of macaroni, then got up and dumped the rest in the trash. It was a waste, and he regretted that. But he had no appetite these days. He'd go in and finish what he'd been working on when Bar Harbor arrived and disrupted him, then find some sports on the TV and fall asleep in his chair.

He left the kitchen, crossed a narrow corridor, and entered his tiny office, a room with no decoration except for a Derby's Food Mart calendar on the wall. There was an old beat-up wooden desk, a threadbare office chair, and a gray, four-door, steel filing cabinet with a shallow dent in one side. The filing cabinet was on wheels, and he gripped it by the top corners and pulled it toward him, exposing a tall, narrow door built into the wall. A security insert, the experts called it. Leo had installed this one himself.

It had a unique and interesting feature.

Reaching under the desk, he flipped a switch. Near the desk lamp, a tiny green indicator lit up. Only then did Leo remove a key from his pocket, fit it into the lock on the door, and give it a cautious turn.

The door came open with a hollow click.

As always, he felt a tingle at the back of his neck at the sound.

The open door exposed a wall cavity ten inches wide by three feet high. In the top of the cavity a steel box was mounted, containing just under forty thousand dollars in hundreds, fifties, and twenties. But it was something below the box that made Leo's neck tingle. A sawed-off shotgun aimed right at him, fastened rigidly upright between the wall studs. A Marlin 410 lever action, with one in the breech, all ready to go. An ingenious arrangement of small pulleys guided a thin cable from the trigger to a stubby lever at the end of an electric solenoid. Open the box without first using the desk switch, the solenoid plunger jumped, and . . . boom.

You would not do that again.

Leo next took two bundles of notes in various denominations from a drawer in the desk—cash that had come in that day—and counted it. Forty-two hundred dollars. Satisfied, he removed a ledger from the kneehole drawer and spread it open on his lap. He was reaching for a pen to ink the new numbers in when there was a bang at the kitchen door.

Leo swore, closed the ledger, and put it back in the kneehole drawer. He put the cash back into the bottom drawer and slammed both drawers shut. He closed the wall insert, locked it,

and rolled the filing cabinet back into place. Lastly, he flipped the switch again, and the little green light went out.

Who was bothering him at this hour? Mr. Bar Harbor? He would see.

Leo trudged across the hall and through the kitchen.

He stepped to the kitchen window and peered sideways through the grimy glass, pressing his cheek against the flaking casement to get an angle on the outside stoop.

It wasn't Bar Harbor. It was some other guy. Some goof out there he didn't recognize. Another messenger from the Tuittes? It was certainly possible. Maybe they'd yanked their poodle boy back and put a rottweiler on him.

To be on the safe side, Leo opened the dishwasher door—the machine had broken down years ago—lifted an upside-down, purple Tupperware bowl, and took a handgun out of the cutlery tray: a 9 x 19 Glock. He hadn't shot anybody in a long time, and didn't want to do it now, but he knew he had to be ready. You never could tell what the Tuittes might do. He worked the slider of the gun a few times, then went and stood to one side of the door.

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Skorzeny? I need to talk to you."

A thin voice. Kind of wheedling.

"Go away."

"My name's Dan Moody. I need some money."

Leo ran his big left hand over his hair. Jeez, how long had it been since he'd gotten a haircut? He was getting bad at remembering things like that. In his right hand, the gun slowly settled until it pointed at the bottom panel of the door.

"Put your hands against the glass and leave them there."

There was a narrow window beside the heavy unglazed door, and when he saw a pair of hands appear there, nothing in them, Leo dropped the Glock into one baggy pocket. Then, keeping his eye on the hands, he unlatched the door and eased it open.

The guy who stood there looking at him could have been a shooter for the Tuittes, but Leo doubted it. He looked more like a little thief-weasel or graffiti bum from behind the rec center. Not that it meant a whole lot on its own. Leo's customers, by and large, weren't the city's most upstanding citizens.

"What'd you say your name was?" He remembered it; he wanted to know if his visitor did.

"Moody. Dan Moody."

"This can't wait till tomorrow? You think I don't have a life?"

The kid shrugged. "Can I take my hands away now?"

Leo nodded. The kid lowered his hands to his sides.

"I'm not from around here," the kid said. "I got directions at the Rob Roy. The guy there seemed to think it would be all right if I came along to see you now."

"The Rob Roy, huh? That don't surprise me. Guys in that place think the world don't exist till the stars come out." He patted the guy down crudely and let him in. Jerked his head at the table. "Sit there, keep your hands in front of you, and tell me why I ought to give you a dime."

The guy sat. Leo sized him up. Late twenties, maybe a little older, scruffy hair narrowing into a widow's peak. Hands thin, no grime or calluses, probably hadn't done a day's work in his life. He looked like he bought his clothes off the Sally Anne discount rack. Eyes gray and searching and intense.

"How much do you need?"

The kid tried to smile. "A couple of grand would be nice."

"Lot's of things would be nice. How much do you need?"

The kid blew air out his pursed lips. "Five hundred?"

"Why should I give it to you?"

"I don't know. I need money. You lend it. That's your business. You make money at it."

Smart-ass, this kid. Quick with the mouth. He had this in common with Mr. Bar Harbor. Difference was, Bar Harbor had money, and the kid here had diddly-squat.

"I don't make money by throwing it out the window!" Leo said. "I haven't seen you around. Why should I trust you? How do I know you won't do a run on me?"

A thoughtful frown. "Well, I'm not sure. Only that would probably be pretty stupid of me. You'd find me, I'm sure of that, and I don't want to have my legs broken."

Leo grunted. Right answer. "You keep thinking that," he said. He poured himself a finger of rye. He was beginning to believe the kid was all right. "Five bills, though—I don't know. If you're a floater, just passing through . . ."

"I'm from out of town, but I'm working here. Got a job at the Rob Roy. All I need is a little stake so I can get myself hooked up." He stared directly into Leo's eyes. Look at me. Honest as the pope. "I plan to open my own bar, Mr. Skorzeny. Not right away, of course, but as soon as I can. And then I'll come to you for some of the money. So I'm not gonna mess things up for myself, am I, by screwing you around."

"Trying to screw me around."

"That's what I meant."

Leo mulled it over. He noticed the kid had pulled his eyes away and was shooting quick, evaluating glances around the room.



Probably the first time he had come to a shy. Probably expected walnut furniture and mahogany paneling. Leo ought to send him to Big Toot and Little Toot, lots of wood paneling there to look at, and pay six points more for the privilege.

Later Leo would wonder if he had been thinking clearly. But at that moment he felt tremendously tired. Worn out. He wanted to get rid of this guy, find a boring game on TV, lay down on the couch, and close his eyes. He took one more look at the kid. It was only five bills. And if he did start a business—like that would happen, but anything was possible—then Leo could hook him on for the big money.

He heaved himself to his feet, jerked a small kitchen drawer open, and pulled a sheet of paper from a clutch of them inside. He slapped it down in front of the kid. "Read this marker and sign it. Where it says there, the amount, write in the five. I'll be right back. Don't get out of that chair."

"Jeez," the kid said with a not unfriendly smile. "Just like at the bank."

"I keep records too," Leo said. He paused. "Somebody might want to buy me out, I have to show what I got, don't I?"

It was a thin joke, meant only for himself.

He shuffled out of the room, feeling as if he weighed at least a million tons. The whiskey, the pills, the pain—they were all getting to him. He pulled the kitchen door shut behind him and locked it. He went into his office. He bent across the corner of the desk, pulled open the bottom drawer, and began counting out the five hundred in small bills from the four grand.

Then he felt the point of the knife at his neck.

"That's fine," the kid's voice purred in his ear, "now put your hands behind you, old man."

Leo sat in the kitchen chair, disgusted with himself. Letting this little thief-weasel get the jump on him! And with his own kitchen knife too. His head throbbed where the kid had slapped him, but that didn't count much; only one more pain on top of all the others. He shifted his weight. He wasn't tied to the chair, exactly. The way the kid had bound him with the electrical cord, his wrists were lashed behind the chair back, and the back thrust up high between his arms. It effectively prevented him from getting to his feet. Part of the problem was his gut. He had to lean forward practically on his face to stand up these days, and the chair back wouldn't let him do that.

The kid was chortling about the Mickey Mouse lock on the door.

"I can't believe it. Security like that. I was picking those things in grade school just as fast as the nuns could lock them. You need something better. Spend some cash, old man. It takes money to make money, didn't anybody tell you that?"

He had the Glock. He had the money from the desk drawer stacked on the table in front of him, where he had twice given up trying to count it. He was so pleased with himself he couldn't keep his mind on the job.

Leo tested the cord around his wrists. There was some slack there, and he would work on that, but it might take a little time. While he was at it, he wondered what he could do to delay this guy. Not much, apparently. He would bundle up the money and go before Leo had a hope of freeing himself. Then Leo thought about Mr. Bar Harbor, imagined him showing up here later and finding Leo tied like a hog for the slaughter. That wouldn't be good, and it wouldn't be pretty.

He laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" the kid said.

"You are."

"Want another slap," the kid said, "to go with the first one?"

"You think that's big money. You don't know what big money is."

The kid threw him a look. "Am I missing something here?"

"Forget it."

The kid pushed his chair back, got up, came toward him.

"No. Let's talk about it. Tell me what you meant by that crack."

"I told you to forget it," Leo said.

The kid hit him across the ear with an open hand. Leo reeled. His ear rang.

"I wanna know," the kid said evenly, "what you meant."

"And I'm telling you to get lost," Leo said. He had trouble with the words; his jaw didn't want to move properly.

The kid hit him again.

Then the kid looked at the stove. At the pot Leo had cooked his dinner in. He reached out and switched on the element, and the stove made fast little pinging noises, heating up. "I'm gonna get this pot smoking," the kid said, "and shove it right in your face. I wanna know what you meant, and I wanna know now."

"You wouldn't burn a guy."

"Just watch me."

Leo knew better, of course. The little psychopath would love it. He'd pull Leo's fingernails out too, if he thought it would get him somewhere.

Leo closed his eyes and put on a defeated look. He let his head roll forward on his chest.

"Okay, okay," he said. "You don't have to get nasty."

"I'm listening." The pot was creaking. Leo could smell macaroni warming up.

"There's a guy supposed to be coming here tonight, he should be bringing some more cash with him."

"How much?"

"I don't know yet. Fifty, sixty grand."

"Keep talking, old man."

"He's my route guy, been making collections, down the South Shore and into the Valley."

"Somebody told me you worked alone."

"I can't help what somebody told you."

The kid studied him. "Anything else?"

"That's all there is. He'll be here anytime now."

"And you're telling me all this because you love me, is that right?"

"I'm telling you this because you're a mental case. I like my face just the way it is."

The kid was studying him. Leo waited. Now is when the kid would decide. Make a run for it with what he had, or hang around and try to up the ante.

The room stank, now, of burnt cheese. The kid yanked the pot from the element and switched off the stove.

"Sounds like easy money to me," he said. "I think I'll wait around a while."

They waited for another hour. The kid counted the cash on the table at least six times. He couldn't seem to get enough of the feel of it, the weight of it, all that dough right there in his hands. Probably wondering how big a pile the rest of it was going to make when it arrived.

Leo kept pulling, straining at his bonds, trying not to be obvious about it. The cord was cutting into his flesh, burning him, a circle of fire now around his wrists. But slowly, slowly, the knots seemed to be loosening.

And then they heard it. They both heard it at once. The soft, muted crackle of tires rolling over the gravel outside in the yard. Somebody pulling in real slow, like they didn't want to announce themselves. Burbling exhaust. Leo recognized the sound. It was Mr. Bar Harbor out there, coming back to sort Leo out.

The kid grinned and picked up the Glock. "Happy days," he said.

He stepped across to the door and waited.

Leo didn't know what the kid's plan was, or even if the fool had one. Probably a fuzzy notion of bashing some bagman over the

head, maybe even shooting him, and then grabbing an armload of cash. After that, make a run for it. For Leo, things were all very dicey. If the kid bashed Bar Harbor, or shot him, he'd discover pretty quick that there wasn't any dough. And just as likely, once that happened, he'd put a bullet in Leo Skorzeny.

Or it might go the other way: Mr. Bar Harbor could plug the kid. That would leave Leo trussed up and helpless with a very provoked Mr. Bar Harbor in his face.

Neither scenario was appealing.

Leo strained harder at the cord.

The kid, with his ear to the door, whispered, "What's he doing out there?"

"What do you mean, 'what's he doing?'"

"Well, why don't he come in?"

"I guess he's suspicious," Leo said. "Most of the time, I go out there and meet him."

"Well you're not going out this time, don't even think it," the kid said.

"Fine. You're calling the shots. But you should open the door at least. He'll be expecting that."

The kid thought a minute. He made up his mind. He began to pull open the door, glancing back at Leo as he did it, a dumb thing to do, but probably what saved him. It put him off center slightly, leaning sideways, when something whacked the doorframe like a tack hammer an inch from his right ear. Startled, the kid leaped back inside, slamming the door. He stared at the doorframe with his eyes wide open. There was a long plug of wood knocked out of it, and there was a hole in the opposite wall of the kitchen.

His expression said it all: Jeez! Someone just tried to kill me!

His bewilderment turned to suspicion, and then anger crept across his face.

"You warned the guy, old man, didn't you?" He stepped closer, took Leo's face in his hand and jerked it upward, twisting Leo's cheeks. The kid's eyes had a flat emptiness in them that Leo had seen before in some guys: definitely a psycho. "You got a signal out to him somehow," the kid said, as if trying to convince himself.

"Don't be stupid," Leo said, struggling to form the words, the kid's hand digging into his face. "How could I do that?"

"I don't know. But you better call him off. Make him toss his gun down and come in here, or so help me, I'll put a bullet in you!"

"It won't work," Leo said. "He doesn't listen good."

"I think he listens just fine. How else did he know I was here?"

"He's just smart. He's hard to fool. You could get some tips from him, if he doesn't shoot you."

The kid let go of Leo, went to the window as if to take a peek outside. Then at the last minute he caught himself and rocked back on his heels. Good thing too. He might have gotten his stupid head blown off, and that would not have turned out well for Leo. Nothing was going to turn out well for Leo as long as he was tied in this chair.

"You talk to him," the kid said, getting a sudden brainwave. He stepped over, grabbed the back of Leo's chair, and tried to shift it, manhandle Leo to the door. But he couldn't do it. There was no way. Leo weighed a good three hundred pounds at last count, and this kid couldn't lift a sack of potatoes.

The kid was rattled.

"Is there another way in here?"

"There's always another way in," Leo told him. "A thief like you ought to know that."

A pinging sound behind the wall made the kid stiffen. Just the water heater clicking on, Leo knew.

"What's behind here?" He stared stupidly at the wall.

Leo tried to shrug, his bound wrists preventing him. "Repair bays. This used to be a gas station."

"Can he get in from there? Where's the door?"

"There isn't one. It's closed off."

"But he got in there! I can hear him!"

Again Leo sighed. Tried to sound exasperated. "There's an outside door. Maybe he jimmied it, I don't know."

"Why would he have to jimmy doors if he's with you? Wouldn't he have a key?" Mounting fear narrowed the sallow face. The kid was brutal, but he wasn't stupid. Leo reminded himself to be more careful.

Again some noise in the other room; this time the burners kicking in. The kid aimed the gun at the sheetrock, moved it left, right, up, and down.

"Go ahead," Leo told him, "pull the trigger. You never know, you might get lucky and hit the guy."

The kid did just that. The Glock was loud in the room. A hole appeared in the wall. Then another and another.

"Keep going," Leo said. "He must be there somewhere."

The kid suddenly realized that the gun was clicking. Now real terror showed in his face. A killer was stalking him, and he was defenseless.

"Bullets," he hissed. "Where are the bullets?"

"On the other side of that wall, right where you shot them, I guess."

"I mean fresh bullets, you idiot!"



"There aren't any."

The kid gaped at Leo with incredulity. An instant later there was a splintering crash, and the door leaped on its hinges. Mr. Bar Harbor had heard the shots, too, and had decided to break into the place. Another blow and the door flew back. The kid raised the now-useless gun in his hand, aimed it at the door, and pointlessly pulled the trigger.

The Glock clicked. At the same instant there was a shot, a different sound than the Glock, thinner, flatter, more of a bang to it.

The slug caught the kid high up, like a hand in the middle of his chest, kept him moving, threw him against the wall, and dropped him on his back by the stove.

Leo shook his head. Dumb kid. This was not a good development. It was a plus to be rid of the psycho case, but he now felt even more vulnerable and exposed than before. Mr. Bar Harbor had come here for a reason. Mr. Bar Harbor had come here to settle a score.

Nothing happened for a moment. Leo couldn't see out onto the stoop. Then a shadow crossed the doorway, and Mr. Bar Harbor, as unrumpled as ever, hobbled cautiously into the room.

"Good shot," Leo said.

"I can hit you just as easily," Bar Harbor announced, bringing the gun around on Leo to make his point. "Who was he?"

"Just a customer."

"With customers like that, maybe the brothers don't need you."

Leo knew he only had a minute. The man wasn't here for further negotiations. Not after their earlier meeting. Not after shooting the kid.

Leo saw now what he had to do. Take the biggest risk of all.

"Stupid kid," he said, "came here to rob me."

Bar Harbor's eyes flitted to the cash spread out on the table. Keeping Leo in his field of view, he limped carefully across the kitchen and gently prodded the bills with his gun barrel. "Chicken feed," he said. "Now I know the brothers don't need your business."

Do it, a voice said in Leo's mind. But don't make it easy.

"Well," Leo said, "you know how it is. Payday was the end of the month, nobody needs a lot of help right now."

Bar Harbor sneered. "I do know how it is. I know the end of the month was two weeks ago, which makes it the middle of the month, so what are you giving me?"

Leo shrugged. He began to answer.

"What I think," Bar Harbor said, overriding him, "is that you're trying to hand me something here."

"Look," Leo said, "I'm being straight with you—" He was interrupted by the bark of the gun. The shock wave of the bullet tearing past his head.

"I think you have more money than what I see here, stashed away somewhere in this place," Bar Harbor said.

"If I told you I didn't, would you believe me?"

"No."

"So what do you want me to say?"

"I want you to stop playing games. I know there's more money here, and I want to know where it is."

"I'm not sure I'm going to tell you that."

"I can shoot you in the leg next. Would you tell me then?"

Leo closed his eyes. He wondered what that would be like. If it hurt bad enough it might take his mind off the pain in his gut. He tipped his head as if to relieve a cramp. "All right, then, I guess it's your call. But you got to let me out of this chair."

Bar Harbor ran the fingers of his left hand over the bristles of his beard. After another moment's contemplation, he said, "What have I got to lose? Why not?"

They went out of the kitchen and into the hall, Leo shuffling along in the lead, Mr. Bar Harbor limping behind him. He had a firm hold on Leo's collar and was pressing the gun barrel into Leo's neck.

Leo stepped through the office door and stopped.

"What's the problem?" Bar Harbor said.

"I just thought of something. How do I know you aren't gonna shoot me the minute I show you where the money is?"

"You don't. It'll be a surprise."

"I'm too old for surprises."

"Get at it, or you won't grow any older."

Leo reluctantly shuffled forward. He took the filing cabinet between his hands and dragged it out from the wall.

There, exposed to the eyes of his visitor, was the security wall insert, the brass of the lock cylinder bright against the drab gray paint of the door.

"Well," said Bar Harbor. "That's interesting. Why don't you open it up?"

Leo obediently pulled out his keys. He thumbed through them for the one he needed, inserted it into the lock, and stopped.

"Well?" Bar Harbor said.

"It won't turn," Leo said. "Sometimes it jams."

"Well, unjam it then."

"I'm trying."

Leo moved the key in and out, jiggled it, and cursed.

"It's not cooperating."

"You're stalling."

"I'm not stalling. This happens all the time. I told you that."

"Get out of the way," Bar Harbor said.


He shoved Leo roughly into the chair behind the desk. Keeping the gun loosely aimed with his left hand, he took the key in his right. He dropped it, felt around on the floor for it, got it into the lock this time, and gave it a twist. The door popped open.

A sawed-off shotgun cuts a wide swath. The Marlin had practically no barrel at all. It's shot pattern spread out rapidly, took Bar Harbor full in the chest, and hurled him backwards. It knocked him across the small room and left him lying on his back, half in and half out of the doorway.

For a long time Leo stayed in the chair. His head and face ached. His wrists burned. His gut felt like there was a piece of razor wire moving around inside it. His ears rang from the boom of the gun. There was a body in the kitchen, a body in the hall. All that cash lying out on the table. A compromising car parked outside the door. A room that badly needed cleaning. All this and he still had that ledger entry to take care of.

Nothing was easy.

He got up, stepped over Mr. Bar Harbor, went into the living room, and sat down in his chair. He began to massage his temples. He would sit here awhile and give his eyes a rest. Just a minute or two, no more than that. 🐦



**M**ysterious meetings and readerly rendezvous are available in the Readers Forum at [www.TheMysteryPlace.com](http://www.TheMysteryPlace.com).

# THE CHRISTMAS CLUB

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GILBERT M. STACK

**T**hey found Carol Potts dead on the ice, her cracked skull leaking blood across the frozen sidewalk.

She was a little old lady who worked as a secretary at my university. I didn't really know her. I certainly had no real reason to want her dead. At the time, I thought talk of killing her was just a sick joke. After her *accident*, I wasn't so certain.

It all began two months earlier at the president's Christmas party. Unfortunately, it didn't end there.

When I first saw Janice and Harry at the Christmas party, they were already deep into their complaints, and their wine. It was an annual event—in more ways than the obvious one—and I'd been looking forward to it for weeks. We made a lot of vague promises during the course of a year to "get together soon," but the president's Christmas party was the only date we could count on each other to keep. It was just habit, I guess.

I lifted my "Christmas ale" in greeting as I approached them. It was a slightly nauseating blend of holiday spices mixed into a fermented base. The president had a new one for each party, and I did my patriotic duty each year and sampled ten or twelve bottles. Janice and Harry always insisted the wine was much better. That was probably true, but as I didn't like wine—a serious failing in an academic—I always chose to suffer through the holiday surprise.

Janice and Harry toasted me in my turn. "You're late," Harry told me.

"I know. I was cleaning up another of Brad's little problems."

Janice and Harry groaned good-naturedly. Brad Norton was my associate dean and not the sort of person who bred goodwill among our future alumni or his colleagues. Brad was lazy and he was mean. The sort of man who delighted in rigidly enforcing rules that were always intended to be bent and broken.

"One of our seniors just missed two finals because her parents





were in a car crash. She rushed home to be with them without filing a request for deferred examinations. Brad wasn't going to let her make up the tests."

Janice's eyes were wide over her wineglass. "That's terrible—even by our standards!"

I grinned. I couldn't help it. This was an egregious example of the utter inhumanity of my favorite subject. "I know. Fortunately for the girl, Brad took advantage of this party to sneak out of the office early and go home, leaving me with the opportunity to clean up behind him."

"Saint Douglas to the rescue!" Harry saluted me with his glass before upending it and draining its contents. When he finished, Harry asked: "So was her family badly hurt?"

"Not hurt at all," I admitted. "Turns out the accident was little more than a fender bender."

"A fender bender?" Janice repeated.

"Yes, the girl is a little high-strung, and she convinced herself that her parents weren't telling her everything, so she raced off home to make certain they were okay."

"Or to put off taking two finals she wasn't ready for."

"Harry, I am astounded by your cynicism. That is precisely what Brad said to her. I, on the other hand, have more faith in my fellow man."

"Or just enjoy stepping on Brad's toes," Harry observed.

"There is that," I agreed before contentedly draining my ale. "Never miss an opportunity to stick it to old Brad. Honestly, he's the worst employee in the whole university. The only thing that motivates him to do some work is the opportunity to be cruel to somebody. If Brad were murdered on his way home tonight, the police would literally have dozens of suspects to investigate."

"Brad may be the worst associate dean in the university," Harry argued, "but he's far from the worst employee."

"Oh please," Janice interrupted, a look of mock disgust on her face, "don't tell me you think *Carol* is the worst."

"She is!" Harry protested. "She's worse than incompetent; she willfully causes trouble."

"If we're going to talk about Carol, I need another beer," I told them.

"And I need a cigarette," Janice added. "Why don't we break for a moment and reconvene on the balcony?"

Harry agreed, eyeing a passing tray of hors d'oeuvres.

I snagged another Christmas ale, then precariously balanced two glasses of red wine as I made my way out to the balcony. Brad, Carol, and Sam Warren in Janice's Human Resources Department

were the three most frequent topics of our all too infrequent conversations. They were quite simply the worst—in both basic competence and attitude—employees in the university. And we three should know. We'd been stuck in the middle management of our respective departments for more than forty years between us.

I was the youngest of the group—forty-eight years old. I got my assistant dean position after two failed years looking for a tenure-track job in an English department—*any* English department. That was eight years ago. At the time, I told myself that the assistant dean job was a temporary move while I polished my credentials, but only one article had since escaped my computer, and I now accepted that I was in the administration for life.

Harry worked in Enrollment as associate director of academic records. Carol Potts was a secretary in his department, serving Harry and three other people. She was so bad at her job that Harry's vice president had finally agreed to hire a second secretary to do Carol's work for her. Universities, I had found, simply didn't like to fire people, especially not little old ladies who belonged to the clerical union.

Sam Warren was the payroll supervisor, one of four people responsible for getting everyone in the university paid. What's worse, he was the supervisor of the three competent people, one of whom was Janice. How a man as lazy as Sam could ever have obtained such a promotion was beyond my ability to fathom, but he had gotten it, and there he would remain until he retired or some idiot promoted him again.

Janice was nearly done with her cigarette by the time I made it out onto the balcony. She put the filtered end to her lips for one last lengthy drag, then flicked the glowing butt over the edge of the balcony to fall to the sidewalk ten stories below.

She took one of the wineglasses from me and treated herself to a long drink. She shivered when she paused for air. "I think I need another cigarette."

I didn't smoke, but standing on that balcony, I was ready to start. It was only twenty degrees without the frigid wind, but with those brutal gusts it felt like ten below.

Janice handed me back her glass and huddled close to my chest while she struggled to light her cigarette. She was very thin in an unattractive sort of way. *Gaunt* or *hollow* could both be used to accurately describe her. Add her usual smear of garish makeup and she was anything but conventionally attractive, but it was nice to have her standing so close to me, even if it was only to light her cigarette.

Harry emerged from the party, an entire tray of stuffed mushrooms

in his hands. He stood next to me to help block the wind, and Janice was finally able to light up. "Been waiting all this time?" he asked her in surprise.

"I lit the first one while I was still inside," she answered, then grinned at his surprise. "It earned me a couple of hostile stares, but I knew I'd never get it lit out here by myself."

Harry started to set his tray down on the balcony railing, but stopped when a new gust of wind buffeted him. Reconsidering, he crouched to place the tray on the floor, then straightened to claim his glass of wine from me.

"Five will get you ten," I told him, "that this wind still flips your tray over."

"I don't really care," he told me. "There are plenty more mushrooms where these came from."

And Harry meant it. He really didn't care if the tray flipped, ruined the mushrooms, and made a mess. It was one of the things I really liked about him. He didn't really care what people thought of him.

Harry was anything but hairy. In fact, at nearly sixty he was almost completely bald. Only his bushy gray eyebrows showed evidence that he once had lots of hair. Now only a few white wispy strands stuck out of the rest of his head. He neither combed nor shaved these few remaining hairs. He honestly didn't care what they looked like.

In dress, he showed the same lack of self-consciousness. His tweed jackets had been out of style since before I started college, but Harry wore them every day, just the same. He was a free spirit, and I was glad to call him my friend.

"So as I was saying—" Harry picked up the earlier conversation.

I crouched down to snatch a couple of the mushrooms while Harry talked. The story would be new, but I had heard it all before. It was what we talked about every time we got together.

"Carol got onto Jean's computer and erased a couple of folders."

"You're not serious!" Janice was too surprised to conceal her astonishment, scoring a few points for Harry in the my-colleague-is-worse-than-yours competition.

"I am serious!" Harry assured us. "One of the documents was an important database Jean had been developing to help us track what proportion of our students' credits are earned at other universities. Carol has been loudly complaining that a database isn't a safe way to store the data, and now she seems to think she's been proved right."

"Unbelievable!" I said. "This is so far over the line. Can they prove she did it?"

"She was seen working on Jean's computer about an hour before Jean found the folders missing."

"So they've actually got grounds to fire her," Janice said after taking another long, warming drag on her cigarette.

"I think so," Harry agreed, "but the VP isn't going to pursue the matter. He won't even confront Carol over it. All he says is 'No harm, no foul' and 'it must have been an accident.'"

"No harm?" I asked. "What about the deleted documents?"

"Well," Harry began, "it turns out that Carol doesn't know very much about PCs—no surprise there."

"What do you mean?" I prompted him.

"It appears that Carol thought that pushing *delete* or dragging a folder into the trash bin was the same thing as erasing the file."

"She didn't empty the trash," Janice guessed.

"On the nose," Harry agreed.

"So it's all over?" I asked.

"Not quite," Harry answered. He paused in his telling to crouch, set down his empty wineglass, and pick up a handful of mushrooms. "Jean is furious. She was already angry about having to do all of the work in the department while Carol talks to her friends on the phone, but this incident is proving to be the proverbial straw. When we get back from Christmas break, she'll be looking for a transfer to another department."

"That's really a shame," I said, "but I hope she finds something."

"She will!" Janice confirmed. "She's got a good reputation. Anyone with an opening would be happy to snap her up."

"I need another glass of wine," Harry said. As he turned toward the door to the lounge, a particularly vicious gust of wind flipped over his forgotten tray, spilling the remaining mushrooms across the balcony.

"It's really a shame the university can't get rid of these people," Harry commented, holding his second glass of wine since leaving the balcony. The first hadn't quite lasted ten seconds.

"It really is hard to get rid of them," Janice said. She had refilled her wineglass as well. "You have to take the time to document the failures, warn the employee verbally and in writing, show that you've tried to counsel her, and help her bring her job skills up to par. Remember, even if the union agrees with you to fire her—and they might in a case like Carol's—you are still going to wind up in court. When a little old lady loses her job to a younger worker, it just looks bad for the employer."

"Sounds like she has to die for Harry to be rid of her," I joked.

Janice nodded seriously. "Death or retirement, I'd say."

"I'm never going to be rid of her then," Harry complained. "Carol is never going to retire, and she'll live to be one hundred and two."

"At least you don't report to her," Janice observed.

"I sense a Sam story coming," I said.

"He just doesn't actually care if anyone gets paid," Janice complained. "Or at least he doesn't until the director comes down on him about all the complaints. Then it's the wrath of God for Teri, Bill, and me, when the whole problem could have been avoided if he'd stop coming in late, taking two hour lunches, and leaving early."

"I've never understood how people can go to work without working," Harry said.

"He's got us to do his work for him," Janice complained, "and us to take the blame."

"It really is a shame there isn't a way to just get rid of them," I said. "The university, not to mention ourselves, would be better off all around."

"Death or retirement," Janice repeated.

"What we need," Harry said, a huge grin splitting his face, is a way to, shall we say, *encourage* death or retirement."

"Well, you can't force someone to retire," I reminded him.

Harry raised a glass in mock toast. "Death it is!"

"How many glasses have you had?" Janice asked him, clearly not taking him seriously.

Harry took another long sip. "Obviously not enough yet, but I'm going to tell you my idea anyway. What we need—for the good of the university—is a way to remove rotten employees. Since the deans and the VPs aren't willing to take the legal route to fire them, I think we need an extra-legal method."

"I believe the word you're looking for is *illegal*," I told him.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "So what the university needs is a few dedicated employees who see the larger picture. Say three people who between them have the experience to identify these troublesome individuals and the loyalty and commitment to the greater good to do something about them."

"Three people like us?" Janice asked, eyes twinkling.

"Exactly! Three hardworking individuals who know each other but aren't that strongly connected most of the year. In fact, the only place they can really count on getting together is the president's annual Christmas party."

"You could call the three 'the Christmas Club,'" I suggested.

"Oh, very good, Doug," Harry applauded. "Now since none of these individuals wish to have trouble with a cold and callous criminal justice system, it would be very important that any actual



deaths resulting from the club's activities appear to be accidents."

Janice was really getting into the spirit of things. "They'd also have to occur off university property. It wouldn't help the university if it got rid of a worthless employee but got hit with a million-dollar lawsuit from the deceased's family."

"Right you are, Janice," Harry agreed. "And to further lessen personal risk, no member of the club should resolve the problem he or she brought to the club's attention. The club would have to take a lesson from *Strangers on a Train*. In our example, that means that I would take care of Doug's problem, Janice would take care of Carol, and Doug would take care of Sam."

"Let the lady kill the lady?" Janice asked, arching an eyebrow in mock protest.

"You cannot expect a gentleman like Doug to murder a lady," Harry insisted.

"I need another drink," I announced.

"Refills," Harry and Janice said simultaneously and handed me their empty glasses.

They were still talking about the Christmas Club when I got back.

"This is more than a little sick," I informed them.

"Right you are, Doug," Harry agreed. "But just so that you know, Janice and I have further refined the task at hand. All members of the club have one year to complete their assignments—from the end of one Christmas party to the beginning of the next."

Harry and Janice were grinning like idiots. "You are both drunker than I thought," I told them.

"Not as drunk as we plan to be," Janice responded.

"To the Christmas Club!" Harry interjected, raising his glass high in a toast.

Janice immediately lifted hers and clinked it against Harry's. "To the Christmas Club!"

They both stood waiting for me to join my bottle to their glasses. "Oh, live a little!" Harry finally told me.

"Or die trying," Janice added, still smiling.

I sighed and lifted my glass, wondering if this would end things so we could return to our usual chorus of grumbles and complaints. "To the Christmas Club!" I clinked my Christmas ale against their wine.

And thus began the year that changed my life.

I didn't even think of the club when I first heard Carol had died. I mean, who would? It was late February, and I hadn't wasted a thought on the Christmas party for two whole months. I got most

of my information from Harry over the phone.

"Harry, I just heard. Did Carol really die?"

"Yes, the poor old girl slipped and fell on the ice in front of her brownstone. She was twenty feet from home, but nobody inside the house noticed what had happened. A commuter found her on the way to work and called 911. I wouldn't be surprised if a dozen others walked right passed her. You know how people are."

"That is just terrible," I said. "Do they know what killed her?"

"Cracked skull and swollen brain," Harry answered.

"That is just terrible," I repeated.

"Don't get too worked up," Harry said with a laugh. "She was still an evil, incompetent witch. It's too bad she had to die, but it's going to be a lot nicer around here without her."

I was shocked into silence. I had always respected Harry for his outspokenness, but there were limits to acceptable impropriety. I mean, I hated Brad, but that didn't mean I would gloat if he died.

With sudden horror I remembered Harry's joke at the Christmas party. It had been a joke, hadn't it? "Harry, you don't think—"

"I'm sorry, Doug, I've got to go. Can I count on you to go to the funeral with me? I'm sure I'll be expected to go, and I don't want to go and pretend I'm all broken up about this alone."

"I don't know, Harry," I protested. "Do you think Janice—"

"Good idea, we'll get the whole Christmas Club to go. Look, Doug, we'll talk later. The VP is calling me now."

I hung up and stared at my phone. Surely Harry didn't think Janice had done this, but why else refer to the Christmas Club?

Feeling some genuine trepidation, I punched in Janice's extension in Human Resources.

"Janice Crawford."

"It's Doug. Did you hear about Carol?"

Janice laughed. "Oh yes, I guess I'm off the hook now."

I felt relief and apprehension simultaneously twining about each other in the pit of my stomach. "So you didn't . . ."

Janice laughed again, even more delightedly than the first time. "If you have to ask, I'll never tell."

I wanted to put the phone down, praying she was making a joke, but frightened that she was not. Instead, I asked her about the funeral.

"Oh no," Janice protested. "Tell Harry that's against the rules. The Christmas Club only meets at the president's Christmas party. I don't have to go to Carol's funeral."

I hung up the phone with my belly churning. Harry and Janice had always shared an odd sense of humor. It was part of the rea-

son they got on so well together and didn't fit in with anyone else. But laughing about an old woman's death seemed beyond the pale, even for them.

I resolved to skip the funeral, but Harry won me over in the end. He didn't return the favor.

Brad died in August in another bizarre accident.

I was at work when I heard the news. Brad was on a two-week vacation, summer session had finally come to an end, and I was enjoying the quiet that precedes the storm of incoming freshmen. Suddenly, Dean Aims appeared in my office. He was quite pale and standing unsteadily. My first thought was that he was having a heart attack.

"Doug," he said, as I leapt up from my desk to come to him. "Have you got something hard to drink in here?"

"Are you all right, sir?" I asked, as I helped him into one of my interview chairs.

"Something to drink," he said again.

I decided this was not a clever trap and fetched a half full bottle of Jack Daniel's from my lower desk drawer. I put a dirty glass on my desk and poured two inches of whiskey into it. Dean Aims took the glass from me without looking at it, so I guided its edge to his lips.

The taste of the whiskey brought him back to life. He filled his mouth and forced the alcohol down. Then he looked up at me and said, "Brad Norton died this morning."

My heart clenched in my chest. "What?"

The dean took another swallow of whiskey. "He fell off his roof and broke his neck. A neighbor found him when she brought her kids back from the pool."

"I can't believe it," I said, but of course I feared I could too readily believe. After all, Harry was on vacation this week too.

I reached for the whiskey and drank straight from the bottle. "Did anyone see it happen?"

The dean shook his head. "Apparently not. He was working on the backside of his house and fell onto a concrete patio. The neighbor's back yard joins Brad's, or he might still be lying there."

"I, I, wow . . ."

"I know," the dean said, staring into the remaining whiskey in his glass. "I really liked Brad."

He got to his feet, looking steadier now, like the whiskey had really braced him. "It's going to be hell around here without Brad—especially with the new year about to begin. I hope I can count on you to help pull us through this."

"Of course, sir."

He looked at his empty glass for a moment, then handed it back to me. "Thanks for the drink."

I watched him leave my office, but I was thinking about Harry and Janice.

I attended Brad's funeral alone. There were other university employees there, but I didn't sit with them. Harry was still on vacation at the Jersey shore. Janice, of course, refused to come.

The church was full to overflowing. Brad was a Roman Catholic like me. And he evidently had a lot of friends. I guess the man I saw mistreat students day in and day out was different than the man who left the office and went home each evening.

It was a hard day for me. I was feeling guilty and scared. The Christmas Club was supposed to be just a bad joke, but now two of the three people Harry had targeted were dead. Admittedly, both deaths looked like accidents, but wasn't that part of the sick plan?

I tried to imagine how Harry could have done it. Sneaking up from the shore to New Milford wasn't as easy as it used to be. There was E-ZPass on the parkway and turnpike, though it wouldn't be that hard to find an alternate route if Harry was willing to drive a little longer. But how could he have gotten to Brad on the roof? How could he have even known Brad would be working on his roof that day? It had to be just a bizarre accident, but after Carol's unfortunate slip on the ice six months ago, I couldn't believe it. Two deaths were just too bizarre to be a coincidence.

Harry must have been watching Brad, trying to figure out how to get to him, when he saw Brad climb onto the roof and realized that that was his opportunity. How exactly he had followed Brad onto the roof and pushed him off without being spotted, I couldn't figure out. It seemed terribly risky.

The priest was telling us to "Go in peace" when a new concern suddenly struck me. Surely Harry and Janice couldn't think I was planning to kill Sam for them. Could they?

"Two down, one to go," was the first thing Harry said to me. He had a wide grin on his face and sported a fairly impressive tan. I'd have expected his bald pate to burn, but somehow Harry had avoided that painful and embarrassing fate.

"I don't think that's funny," I told him.

Harry's smile was undiminished. "Yes it is! First Carol, now Brad, both apparent accidents—I'd say the pressure is on. Wouldn't you?"

"I'm not going to kill Sam," I told him.

Harry held his hands up in mock horror. "Of course not, these

are just *accidents*." He lowered his hands and grinned even more broadly. "So have you figured out how you're going to do it?"

"Harry!"

He took a step back, raising his hands again. "You're right! Don't tell me! Best if I don't know!"

"Harry!"

The overbroad grin relaxed a bit so that Harry looked more like my friend again. He stepped in too close and lowered his voice. "Don't worry, Doug, you've got plenty of time. There's nearly four months until the Christmas party."

Looking at the expression on my face made him laugh. "Still, maybe I'd better check with Janice on the penalties for failure of a member of the club to perform his duties."

He laughed again and tapped his watch. "Time's ticking," he said and strode off toward the elevators.

Either Harry couldn't let a bad joke drop, or he really wasn't joking. Every time I saw him after that, whether near enough to talk or just passing in a hall, he would lift his wrist and tap his watch.

Janice was no better. She smiled the only time I asked her about the club and said, "Doug, do you really think I could commit a murder?"

The trouble was, I was halfway convinced that she had.

My uneasiness came to a head when I ran into Harry and Janice in the cafeteria one afternoon in October. They were leaving as I was getting on line. It was the first time I had seen them together since the Christmas party last December.

Harry actually spotted me first and ran over beside me. Janice waved from the entrance but did not follow Harry to my side.

"Doug," Harry greeted me, putting his hand on my shoulder as he came up next to me. "Glad we ran into you. Can't stay—we're both running to meetings—but we thought you'd like to know. The penalty we spoke about would have to be death. It's the only way the other members of the group would feel secure."

With a cheery "Got to run!" Harry hurried back over to Janice, leaving me staring openmouthed after him.

Janice lifted her left arm so I could see it and pointed to the watch on her wrist. They were both laughing as they walked off toward the elevators.

I'm not sure how long I stood there staring after them. It was probably only a few seconds because no one cut ahead of me in line. I just couldn't believe that Harry and Janice had just threatened me. Yet I *did* believe it. They had murdered Carol and Brad, and now

they were warning me that they'd kill me as well if I chose not to murder Sam.

I turned back to my tray, mechanically collected a plate of macaroni and cheese, and filled a cup with Coke from the machine. I don't really remember paying for the meal. Nor do I remember eating it. Harry and Janice had murdered Brad and Carol. And they were thinking about murdering me. I simply didn't know how to deal with this situation.

I couldn't go to the police because they thought Brad and Carol had died in accidents. And if by some miracle they did believe me and reopened the two cases, they'd probably charge me with conspiracy.

No, I couldn't go to the police, and that meant to protect myself, I'd have to do the unthinkable. I'd have to murder Sam, or I'd have to murder Harry and Janice.

Looking back, I wonder why I didn't consider killing Harry and Janice more seriously. After all, Sam might be a jerk, but he was also innocent. Janice and Harry were not. They were murderers who were compounding their crimes by threatening to kill me. Killing them first would be an act of self-defense, morally if not legally.

But frightened of them as I was that autumn, Janice and Harry were still my friends. I liked them, and I sort of had a thing for Janice. There were also two of them, and if I couldn't get them together the survivor would be coming after me in self-defense. Maybe I was aware of all this subconsciously, but I never consciously analyzed it until much later. The simple truth is, I never seriously considered killing Janice and Harry. And I don't know why I didn't.

Sam, however, was another matter entirely.

**I**t took only three weeks from the day I decided to kill Sam to the moment I ended his life. I could have done it more quickly, but I wanted to be careful. I had to kill him on the first try, and I couldn't afford to be caught doing it.

I started by waiting for Sam in the lobby of our building and following him when he left work. I was relieved when he hurried directly to Penn Station. Following him would have been impossible if he'd gone to a parking garage. I don't own a car.

I lost him for a moment after he entered the station, but caught sight of him again, making his way down to the subway. I followed after, struggling to keep him in sight. Rush hour funnels thousands of people through that station, and it was difficult to follow Sam



and still keep my distance from him.

Sam finally settled in to wait on the uptown A train. He stood on the yellow stripe at the edge of the platform and leaned out so he could stare up the tracks into the dark tunnel and look for a coming train. I knew immediately how I would kill him. I might have been able to do it that first day, but I decided to be patient. I spent the rest of the week confirming Sam's pattern, and the following two building my nerve for the attack.

I killed Sam Warren on a Wednesday afternoon one week and a day before Thanksgiving. It was the most abominable and exhilarating act of my first forty-nine years.

Sam was leaning out off of the platform waiting for his train when I sidled up behind him. The lights of the approaching engine appeared in the tunnel and Sam straightened up, still standing on the forbidden yellow stripe. The loose throng of people suddenly packed in tightly around us as eager commuters stepped forward as the train approached. The engine erupted from the tunnel. The screech of brakes pierced the air. And I shoved Sam Warren hard with my right hand.

Two seconds later, he was dead.

The police investigated Sam's death. I guess that's standard when a man is run over by a subway train. The tragedy covered the front page of every city newspaper and was mentioned on all the local broadcasts, but by Thanksgiving Day the story, like Sam, was gone and forgotten.

The death was ruled an accident.

I was breathing easily again when I reached the president's Christmas party that December. I had had one truly terrible night worrying that the police would catch me, but after that a smug feeling of power and confidence began to infuse me. I had done it. I was in the club. I hadn't disappointed my friends.

As they usually did, Harry and Janice had preceded me to the party. They both had a glass of wine in their hands. Harry was also eating mushrooms. Janice was already grumbling. "Can you believe it?" she was saying. "I mean, I've worked with her for years. Who would have thought that a temporary little promotion would turn mousy little Teri into Attila the Hun?"

They greeted me by raising their glasses but did not break off their conversation. I silently toasted them back. This year's bottle was called "Winter Mix" and, if anything, was even more terrible than last year's Christmas ale.

"I know what you mean," Harry told Janice. "You think you know somebody."

"Is there trouble with Jean now that she's got Carol's job?" I asked.

"No, no," Harry assured me. "Jean is an angel. We're really lucky to have her. No, I was talking about Rick Stevens. Do you know him?"

"Not well," I admitted. "Works in your office, doesn't he?"

"Assistant director of academic records," Harry confirmed. "Did you hear he ratted me out? Went to the VP to complain I've been slipping out early and drinking my lunch."

"You're not serious," Janice said.

"Yes, I am!" Harry snapped. "I treated that boy like my own son, and he does this to me. They want me to go for counseling, for Christ's sake."

I shook my head, an idea beginning to take shape within me. I decided to test the waters. "I know what you mean. Life is certainly better now that Brad has left us, but I can't believe the kind of crap Dean Aims lets Katie Morgan get away with. I had always thought Brad was the whole problem, but now that he's gone Katie is really trying to outdo him. It's like none of them understands that we're here to help the students, not to make life difficult for them."

We stood for a moment in silence, drinking our wine and our beer. Finally, Janice ventured: "I wish there was something we could do."

"There is," I reminded her.

Harry and Janice looked over at me with interest.

"It worked the first time, why not try round two?"

Their expressions remained blank, which really irritated me.

"The Christmas Club!" I said.

Both my friends hesitated, then Harry started to grin. "For a moment there, you really had me going." He clapped me on the shoulder. "I didn't know you had it in you, but after all the ribbing I've given you this year, I really had that one coming."

Janice was still not smiling. "Doug, you knew we were joking, didn't you? You didn't . . ."

Her voice trailed off. I didn't like the expression on her face. Evidently, she didn't like mine.

Harry, however, was still smiling. "Janice, you don't think Doug could . . ."

His voice trailed off also as he considered the possibility.

- I was considering too, trying to force a smile onto my face. Because if it was too late to convince Harry and Janice I was joking, then I would have to kill them too. ♣

# MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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## Choke Point

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January/February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the July/August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

# A MURDER IN MARCUS GARVEY PARK

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G. MIKI HAYDEN

**O**ne of the wood-carvers at the market from her homeland of Ghana had suggested Miriam try the African specialty shops, with her grass-and-frond baskets. So Miriam and her co-wife Nana had ventured out early, trying to get the merchandise into some neighborhood stores. The shopkeepers liked the baskets, they really did—but business was slow. People wanted fabrics, or paintings, or leather goods these days—not baskets. Customers could buy handsome Indonesian baskets cheaply in Marshalls department store, nearby.

Dispirited, and with every single basket still in her possession—well, Nana was carrying most of them—Miriam led Nana back on 124th by Marcus Garvey Park. How amazing that each fall the trees changed their colors to red and gold. When Miriam had lived on the West African coast so many years before, she had never seen the change of seasons as she did here in New York's Harlem.

"I like those baskets in Marshalls," Nana enthused, for they had gone in there to take a peek. "What a great store! The prices are good too, I think. We could buy many things in there for . . . Christmas." The girl stared off into the distance, apparently ensnared by the spell of a holiday that was not even her own.

Miriam felt somewhat betrayed. Did the girl not appreciate the fineness, the individuality of the baskets her co-wife produced? Perhaps Miriam might lower her own prices a little, she conceded to herself. Sales on the days she perched on a stool in the Shabazz Market on 116th were not brisk.

They rounded the corner from the north side of the park to the west, where they were met by an unusual sight—a bevy of policemen descending the lookout. A couple of the men carried a stretcher between them with something on it. Miriam's insides

suddenly lurched before her brain even registered what she was seeing—the stretcher held a body on top. The officers were bringing not just a body down from the area of the watchtower heights, but the body of a white female.

A white woman dead in Marcus Garvey Park. Not a good thing at all. A white woman probably murdered in the middle of Harlem.

"Oh, Mama, look. A white woman," said Nana unnecessarily. "Poor thing. And she's pretty. Do you think she's dead?"

Miriam knew the woman was dead. How could one see the body and the way they carried it and not know? "Yes, of course," she answered. She looked at Nana, ever curious about the girl's unpredictable reactions to life.

How long had the girl lived here with Kofi and Miriam? Less than a year. Miriam wanted to understand something about the young woman but had hardly been able to make out who she was and what she thought, aside from the little oddities that showed on the surface.

The two came closer to the police and a gathering crowd of observers, who wanted simply to look on. Miriam and Nana stopped among the curious passersby.

"A dump job," Miriam heard someone say.

"A dump job," Miriam repeated softly to no one but herself. She wasn't sure just what that meant. Unless it meant a human being, a woman, had been discarded like a piece of trash—dumped in the park because she was no longer of use to the one who had thrown her there. The fact that she was a white woman too—so much in the minority in this community—made the thought of violence done against her rather frightening. What might it say about how the people here treated any from outside their circle. *Let us not be that way.* Tears formed in her eyes.

"What do you think, Mama?" Nana asked. "The husband or the boyfriend got rid of her, I think. Maybe men can do that to their women here like sometimes at home." Nana seemed seriously to be considering that potential fact of life.

"Of course not," snapped Miriam. The idea—not Nana—offended her greatly, maybe because a thread of truth lay in the girl's statement. "All people are valuable. No human may decide who can live and who can die." But men did kill their women sometimes—or someone else's woman, maybe, too. And she thought with an inward revulsion of the *trokosi* slaves in her homeland, taken at whim or for vengeance against a family by the local priests. The girls were used as sexual slaves, as well as being made to work the fields. Their offspring became slaves too, in time.

And as for the spread of HIV/AIDS in the West African countries and the inability of women to refuse unprotected sex—that was discussed all the time in the newspapers Kofi still received from “home.” Twenty-five years had passed, and they still thought of Ghana as home.

The dead woman was put into a red and white ambulance and taken away, and with nothing left to see, Miriam began to move off toward their apartment, leaving Nana to figure out the change in direction and hurry to catch up.

“Oh, Mama, do you think that women are of value too?” asked the girl, who was not the slightest out of breath, though trotting quickly. “Even if it isn’t true, you say that so nice.”

Miriam raised her eyebrows, furrowing her forehead. She tried to make exact sense of what the girl had said and why. Was Nana about to ask a favor of Miriam now? What kind? Had Nana done something wrong and was asking forgiveness?

“You are very smart, Mama. Maybe you can solve this crime and find out what happened to the poor white woman if she’s dead.” After they’d crossed the street and were closer to home, Nana turned back and watched the lingering onlookers behind them.

“First of all, that’s ridiculous,” objected Miriam. “I have no idea who she is or what happened to her any more than you do. Second of all, why should you care?”

“Oh I don’t care,” Nana agreed. “I don’t care at all. I just know that you could do it—find out what went wrong and fix it, like you do everything else. Sometimes a woman might be killed, and I know it’s nothing really. Her parents might care a little bit for a time, but no one else.” Nana seemed absorbed in some disturbing memory behind the thought, and Miriam wondered about the girl’s first marriage, the one from which she’d been returned to her family, making her worn goods and only fit to send to an old man in the United States as a useless second wife to feed and clothe.

Then Miriam dismissed the discussion from her mind and concentrated on climbing the stairs inside, while Nana took all the awkward packages and ascended without holding the railing. Nana, of course, was not really useless, Miriam amended to herself.

By the next day, Miriam ought to have forgotten about the white woman while fretting over her own lack of luck in selling her baskets, but strangely enough, the opposite was true. In her mind’s eye she could see nothing but the white face drained of all color by death and the surrounding artificially blond hair accentuating the ghostly tone of unresponsive flesh.

Of course, when Nana said that Miriam could figure everything



out, the young woman was wrong. The police, Miriam knew from television, had many advanced technologies they would apply. She supposed they might have found footprints high in the bushes and were even now determining the type of footwear worn by the man who'd disposed of the woman up there. And they would have taken tissue from under nails and could identify the felon's DNA, which would light up a name on a special NYPD computer within minutes. She had seen these things.

Not that Kofi liked for Miriam to watch such shows. He didn't. He thought long athletic contests in which men kicked a ball here and there, trying to get it into a wide wire mesh, was the most appropriate entertainment for Miriam, for Nana, and for himself. Soccer, though the national sport of most of the English-speaking world, including Ghana, gave Miriam not the slightest lift at all. So she and Nana would watch other shows when Kofi was out talking with the men or had gone into the bedroom for a nap—a home makeover to suit the girl, or a nice homicide investigation just as Miriam enjoyed.

This morning, after they had eaten their breakfast and Kofi had packed up the goods he sold at the market and had left for the day, Nana ran a bath for herself—she would take forever—and Miriam went to the Ninety-Nine Cent Shop on 125th to buy for their dinner whatever might be on sale. Much to her delight, she found frozen chicken. She couldn't believe it. Big packages of frozen chicken for ninety-nine cents each. She bought several. The three of them could have chicken for their dinner for at least two nights, at no more than fifty cents for each person's meal. The bargains sometimes available were very amazing.

She did come back by way of Fifth Avenue to Marcus Garvey Park, just out of a sense of general interest. Not that she expected to see anything unusual, no. But she felt as if she had unfinished business on her plate.

A boy from the building—could he be twelve or thirteen?—walked right by her, and she nodded pleasantly. "Can I help you with your packages?" he asked. All the children in the apartment house were so well trained that she marveled. On television the children in Harlem ran with gangs. In real life, their parents would have locked them in the house at the first sign of trouble. These were good kids.

She debated, then gave him her package with frozen chicken and frozen okra just to keep him alongside her. "You play in the park here, Martin," she said.

"Yes, ma'am." Oh, his mother Karen would be so proud; she'd feel satisfied. Miriam would report this good behavior to her directly.

"Did you see that they found a dead woman there yesterday?" Perhaps she wouldn't mention the conversation to the mother. In fact, perhaps she really shouldn't bring up such a matter to the child. She eyed him steadily to judge his reaction. He cast his gaze down.

"Uh . . . yes," he said.

"Well, I'm not with the police, so don't be so nervous," she remarked hastily.

"I know," he answered. The Fifth Avenue bus came slowly along the west side of the park.

"Look." Miriam pointed to a very large advertisement on the bus's exterior. *"If you see something, say something,"* she read. "That is the new rule." Of course she had been told that the advisory pertained to any terrorist threats, and she wasn't at all sure what that "something" might amount to in such a regard.

"I know," he repeated and nodded as if that saying was meaningful to him. "I did see something the other night. At least I guess I did. I was just hanging out. It was a little late, and I had to get home."

"Of course," said Miriam. She stopped. They were near the building, and she wanted him to have a chance to speak his piece. She was going to defrost the chicken anyway.

He halted alongside and looked at her seriously. "I saw the white limousine. Do you know the one I mean?"

Miriam didn't.

"The man they call the Judge owns it." Martin turned and pointed toward where the police cars and the ambulance had sat yesterday evening. "The limousine was parked over there." He gazed down at the ground again and shrugged. "That's all I saw, really. I didn't want to get involved."

"That's all right," Miriam said, and she resumed their progression. But was it all right? Certainly not. Now she was responsible for holding this very important piece of information, probably the key to the entire murder case. In a minute, feeling confused and guilty, she entered the building and began to struggle up the four flights to home.

Miriam often kept Nana close to her side simply because she didn't know what else to do with the girl and not wanting her to get into any serious trouble. From time to time Miriam found an errand for her, however, such as today, when Miriam sent Nana to seek out any sign of a white limousine owned by a black man, somewhere in Harlem. Harlem was large, but the girl was hearty and healthy, and the day, however cold, was sunny.

Moreover, Nana had a warm jacket Miriam had bought for her last week for twenty-nine dollars in the Salvation Army thrift shop on 125th. The coat was a nice, respectable, dark blue, though Nana had kept her eye on a skimpier red one all the while they stood in line at the cash register to pay. The red had even been a little lower in price, but Miriam was having none of that, and in the end, Nana was happy for the jacket once they'd hung it in the closet at home.

Twenty-nine dollars, Miriam mused, as she set out a few baskets on a brown and green African-style cloth near her husband's table at the crafts market on 116th. If Nana were her own child, she couldn't treat the girl any better than she did. At that thought, she felt relieved because when Kofi had sent for his high school friend's daughter as a second wife, Miriam had felt angry and jealous and had worried she would take it out on the woman coming through no fault of her own. Thank God the worst had not happened, and instead, the two had become what the English (who had ruled Ghana once upon a time) called bosom companions.

When Nana returned after an hour, a vague smile on her face, Miriam decided the girl had met an interesting man, and looking for the limo had slipped her mind. "It's lunchtime," Nana said when she came near to Miriam, who sat with the same number of baskets she had brought to this spot earlier in the day. Nana looked at her nice watch—eight dollars on the street, out of Miriam's egg money. How Miriam loved those clever English expressions, though this one she wasn't sure about. Maybe it meant that, like eggs, the money came in a certain fashion. What fashion would that be?

Miriam reached into her plastic lunch bag and, speaking of eggs, gave Nana a hard-boiled one along with a yam. Then she gave Kofi two eggs and a yam. Naturally, the man would get an egg more than the women. Why was that exactly? Miriam took her own egg and cracked it on the concrete next to where Nana had settled herself.

"Do you have salt?" Nana asked, then added, as if the information was the last thing on her mind, "I found the automobile."

Miriam handed the girl a little packet of pepper, all she had left of her stockpile, and noticed Kofi looking at the packet with some interest. Miriam pretended she hadn't observed his desire for the condiment.

"Now you tell me," Miriam answered. "We could have gone first and *then* had lunch." But maybe that was just why Nana had smartly waited to tell her co-wife.



A white limousine was parked on the curb outside the Judge Newcomb Community Service building on 120th Street, a narrow townhouse in need of renovation. The license on the car, what Miriam had heard called "vanity plates," said HERE COMES THE JUDGE. Miriam had never noticed the place before, but she had certainly been told recently that these buildings, not so long ago bought for fifty and sixty thousand dollars, were currently selling for between one and two million.

Nana stood admiring the long, elegant white car until Miriam took her by the arm and led her to the building entrance. There, the senior wife tapped timidly at the door. "Go on in," shouted a neighbor on the sidewalk. He waved them with a push, in clear indication. So Miriam walked in, making sure that Nana entered too. The place was as shabby inside as it was out.

A woman standing at a long, high desk barred their further ingress in the front room and looked at the two visitors without much enthusiasm. "WhakinIdofuryou?" she asked.

Miriam took a moment to decipher the message, then she pondered. What kind of community service might she want from a judge? "I'd like help getting my peddler's license," she said shyly. With a license, she'd be able to offer her baskets for sale on 125th Street. No one else sold baskets out there, only books about an idyllic life once upon a time in Africa, shea butter, incense, oils, framed pictures based on African themes, and fruit.

"Oh," said the woman. She seemed familiar with Miriam's request and reached underneath her table, fetching up an official-looking form. "Fill it out and come back," she enunciated. "Bring two pictures." She looked Miriam over unapologetically. "But you probably aren't going to get the license unless you're a military veteran. The city only gives a certain number, and those are long gone." She shrugged. "Maybe the judge . . ." She shook her head dubiously. "Citizen?" she asked. "Green card?"

That, indeed, was a troubling question, and Miriam wasn't sure of the answer. This was the sort of thing she had never even tried to ask her husband.

"Citizen," she said softly, though she didn't know.

"Fill it out. Come back," repeated the woman.

Miriam took the form, thanked her, and withdrew, Nana following close behind.

"How lucky you are," said Nana after they stepped out. "I'd like to get a peddler's license too." Miriam refrained from commenting on the whole absurd scenario.

Now both women stopped and stared at the limo—and at the tall black man in his shirtsleeves, despite the cold, who ran a clean

rag over the spotless surface of the car. He was a fine man, and if Miriam had only been thirty years younger . . . But she wasn't. She looked at her co-wife, whose eyes shined at the sight.

Nana led and Miriam followed to the street where they both examined the car further with rapt and well-focused attention. "This is a good car," Nana said. "Of course I have driven in many cars before, but I would sometime like to ride in a car like this." Then she acted as if she'd just noticed the man wiping off the car. "This must be your car," she said admiringly. She smiled.

The man stopped his work and began, in Miriam's opinion, to make a complete fool of himself. Miriam sighed. They always did. Such was the effect of Nana upon men.

The car was his—Wallace's—but at the same time it wasn't, he explained. Though surely someday soon he would give Nana a ride. He'd drive her anywhere she wanted to go—and back again—even if the car was not actually his. After all, he was—his muscles seemed to flex on their own accord—the car's driver.

"Then you would drive it every night," suggested Miriam, jumping into the conversation.

"Oh well, the Judge often takes it out himself," the young man admitted. "But other times I drive for him, or I might take it myself." The lungs inflated the chest again, and he looked at Nana hopefully.

At home that evening, with Kofi in his presiding chair, Miriam allowed as how the women had gone to the center the judge ran. And she was about to mention the peddler's application, so as to see what Kofi might say about their status in this country.

But Kofi reacted quickly to the mention of the judge. "He's a bad man, and you two had best stay away from him." He glanced at Nana, seemingly uncertain as to how much he could say in front of her, as if she were a child. That was the posture, in fact, the two had taken toward the girl. And Kofi didn't sleep with her. Something had gone wrong in that department, and the usual expectations of marriage were never mentioned among the three of them. Certainly Nana would never talk about any such thing. She was patently interested in much younger men. Men her own age. Men with firm muscles or a little extra cash in their pockets, or perhaps the use of an elegant car.

When Nana was out of the room, Kofi whispered things he had heard from his male friends at the market about drugs and prostitution that the judge was involved with. He warned Miriam in the strongest terms possible to stay away from where the judge did his business—his *dirty* business—lest she get stolen away by the

slavers—and Nana with her. His voice dripped with dire threat of what could happen to women alone and unprotected; and he emphasized what fate might befall a girl like Nana because, Miriam guessed, Kofi knew his senior wife was fond of the girl.

Of course, certainly, he might be right, though he seldom was, and most often when he spoke like this—a story of the bogeyman, as Miriam saw it—he was merely trying to keep Miriam under his control. The pull he exerted made her feel stubborn, though, not submissive.

The next day, after Kofi had left the house, Miriam took her favorite ballpoint pen and carefully filled out the application for a peddler's license, leaving all questions of citizenship and green card numbers blank. Using a paper clip, she affixed two photos of herself snapped by a photographer last year at the market.

She was alarmed at her own audacity, as she was, of course, afraid that she lived here illegally, and that she'd be sent back to Ghana should the authorities discover her unlawful status. And something in her also trembled at the idea that the judge was a gangster—and had maybe prostituted and had killed the white girl. But Miriam hadn't forgotten the pale white face or the body empty of animation bouncing on the stretcher between two policemen. The judge was her only clue, and she'd learned nothing yet. In an odd and undefined way, Miriam had become responsible for the white girl who had been so badly victimized.

**E**verything was different when she went back. The woman wasn't at the desk inside, but rather a strange Spanish man with bulging eyes. Miriam didn't know whether she ought to approach. Her mouth was dry.

"Can I help you?" he called from across the room. He gestured her forward.

"The woman . . ." Miriam began.

"Not here now. I'm Mr. Caldrone, the office manager." He spotted her application and held out his hand. "Come on." She could almost hear, "I haven't got all day," but he didn't say it. She gave him the page, and he nodded in an indication that she could leave now.

Reluctantly, Miriam trudged away, past a bulletin board, which, being an unredeemed reader of notices of all kinds, she stopped to look over. There on the board, staring out at her across a flyer marked MISSING, was the face that had been on her mind for two days. She took in the information as a cat who has gone weeks without food might inhale a dish of milk.



*Ellen Newcomb, wife of Judge Ronald Newcomb, last seen on Wednesday night, wearing . . .* The judge's wife! The dead woman was the judge's wife. The black judge had a white wife and maybe he had killed her. Now he was acting a part by tacking a poster up on a piece of painted-over board and claiming she was "missing." Miriam at once felt sad and angry and discouraged by the apparently common rules of human life.

She walked home in the cold with the wind blowing unpleasantly at her neck, suddenly certain that the judge had killed the woman and left her in the park to hide that fact. *It's a dump job.* She could hear the words as plainly as if the man were speaking them right now. Close to her building, she all at once noticed, with a shiver caused by more than the cold, that the judge's limousine was here, double parked in the street. Or maybe it was someone else's long, white car?

Miriam's heart pounded with a sudden fear, and all sorts of wild thoughts entered her mind: The judge knew she suspected him and had followed her home. The judge knew she was an illegal alien and had come to threaten her.

But no. The car door opened and Nana gracefully slipped out of the passenger's side, then turned back to wave at the driver. The girl smiled, the very picture of youthful beauty and health. Miriam envied her with more a thrill of admiration than of jealousy, and in a way she felt proud to have the girl in her own otherwise charmless home. But rushing forward to meet the young woman, Miriam also felt great anxiety for the girl. No one had warned Nana about the judge. Neither Miriam nor Kofi had wanted to mention the words "drugs" and "prostitution" in front of her. Now the child might be in danger.

Nana saw her co-wife and stopped. Then Miriam came forward and took the girl's arm, holding tightly. "The white woman was the judge's wife," she said. "Stay away from those people."

"Oh no," responded Nana in surprise, the exclamation meaning nothing in particular. Her eyes were murky and hard to read. Caution was not the ruling guide of youth, Miriam knew. Miriam would have to be wary for her.

The thought that a man might be entitled to murder his own wife plagued Miriam as the two women climbed the dirty, old marble stairs. Though well brought up by strict parents who had sent her to learn at a British-run school until she was sixteen, Miriam remained influenced by a great deal she had seen among her own people early on. Her mother, her father's sole wife, was never beaten by her husband, but the prevailing attitude toward

men who did beat their wives—even to death—was that while such a thing was regrettable, certainly, who knew what happened in a marriage or what offense the wife might have committed? And the husband was the husband, after all. One simply tried to ignore such things. Interfering in the marital affairs of others, unless one was a relative, was not proper.

The case of a white woman with a black man would be even more confusing, especially when the woman was young and very pretty, and the man was influential and had money.

"So, Mama," said Nana, startling Miriam, who had shut their apartment door behind them and begun to unbutton her fraying old tan coat. "You have solved the murder." She smiled. "I knew you could. The judge killed his wife. Now you will go to the police and he'll be arrested."

"I suppose so," said Miriam weakly, her knees losing a little of their strength, and not just from the climb but from the prospect of carrying through on this.

"Oh, Mama, it is good. Women shouldn't be murdered in this country, should they?" Nana set down the little secondhand leather purse Miriam had polished for her with shea butter to make it shine. "You will make everything right." The tears came to Nana's eyes, and Miriam would have thought her softhearted but knew she wasn't exactly that.

"Was it something that happened at home?" Miriam asked. She meant, of course, at home in Ghana, which Nana undoubtedly understood.

The girl, her coat still on, settled on the sofa. The air inside the apartment was cold. "He and the first wife beat the third wife," Nana said. She bit her lip, ordinarily an affecting gesture but now a heartbreaking one. "She was thirteen." This was said in the tone of greatest intimacy, and the two women looked at one another, communicating some secret knowledge that only the two of them might share—a background, a deep shame, a terror of an evil that couldn't be stopped.

Miriam nodded. "I'll just rest a minute," she said. "Then I'll go out."

The police station, though shabby, was intimidating in its imposition of authority. Miriam forced herself into the building as she had forced herself into many frightening situations throughout her life. If they investigated her, if they threw her in jail, if they threw her out of the country, well, she would have to accept any of that in the name of justice.

She waited at the desk to be noticed, and wet her lips so she

could speak when she finally was seen. "About the white woman found in Marcus Garvey Park a few days ago," she said, once she was acknowledged.

The black man standing high above her, behind the thick wooden counter, stared down until he picked up the phone. He then motioned her to a bench across the room, and she went and sat.

Soon, another policeman, a white man in a suit, brought her upstairs in a little elevator. She was grateful not to climb any more stairs but felt uncomfortable in that small compartment, alone with him.

Reminding herself of Nana's former co-wife and the necessity to speak up for the woman in the park—for all women, it seemed—once settled at his desk, Miriam began nervously in a subdued voice. "The white woman found last week in Marcus Garvey Park," she said. She cleared her throat. Perhaps she shouldn't have mentioned the word "white" to the white man. Perhaps he was sensitive. She rushed on. "Judge Newcomb's wife." She looked at the white policeman, who gazed at her, seemingly interested, but a bit puzzled. "Sometimes a husband might be the one to murder a wife," she whispered, though here she was on surer ground. She knew that was true.

"The woman," he said. "Yes, Ellen Newcomb." He nodded. He knew.

"The notice at the Judge Newcomb Community Service building," she said, reluctant to finish her sentence.

"I know. Someone finally put two and two together," he said kindly.

"But perhaps she was killed by a family member?" Miriam persisted. She didn't want to tell about the limousine being seen at the park. She didn't want the boy interrogated.

"She wasn't killed," said the white policeman, letting out his breath. "She overdosed on heroin. She was a habitual user." He showed Miriam the inside of his right arm, covered by the gray cloth of a suit that looked comfortably warm. "She had needle marks. Tracks."

Miriam was surprised—stunned, really. No one had killed the woman then. No one! That was good. That was best. She was glad. Nana would be glad as well. But no, they must both mourn the woman and remember her anyway. Miriam ventured a little smile of relief at the policeman and stood up. "Good," she said. "Good." Now all she wanted was to get away before she was arrested for something or other. She thanked him sincerely and found her way as directed.

She felt almost happy until the moment she was out the door.

Then she realized that of course something was very wrong with this case. The body was a dump job. Ellen Newcomb had been dumped in the park, so that even if she had killed herself by way of a drug overdose, the person who had dropped her there for the playing children to find the next day was hiding something. Hiding giving her the drugs, hiding giving her the overdose. Hiding killing her. Miriam should have said about the limousine.

She stopped at the store and bought two identical apple crumb pies, breaking her budget for the next week. But she wasn't about to buy a pie for Martin and his mother and not have such a treat for her own family's dinner.

After depositing the one pie in her own apartment, she climbed another two flights and knocked on the door of the boy who had seen the limousine, calling out, "It's your neighbor from downstairs."

Karen answered the door and Miriam made her offering, then asked for Martin's help in using the stepladder to get something from her cabinet.

"You don't need to give us something to get Martin to help you," protested his mother. "He'll be happy to help you anytime."

"Oh the pie is just a neighborly act," countered Miriam. "I bought one for our dinner as well."

She waited until she and Martin were in the safety of her own apartment to question him again. Who had he seen? How could he describe the man?

"He wasn't too old. He was a big guy and black," Martin said. "Which cabinet was it?"

Miriam let the boy bring down the cans of soup she'd had Nana place on the upper shelf the day before.

"Oh yeah," he said. "One more thing. I think he was talking to someone in the car. Someone in the front seat."

Miriam could hardly concentrate on preparing the dinner, pondering the question of who had killed and/or dumped the girl. Had the judge's wife given herself an overdose, then been dumped? But for what reason? Did the judge want to get rid of her body because having a drug addict wife was an embarrassment? But why then publish a flyer, seeking her out? Miriam was dizzy by the time she heard Kofi come in the door, but one thing was clear: Wallace, the limo driver, was the one who had planted the body high up on the hill. Why hadn't the police thought out all that? Were they afraid to accuse a prominent citizen? Had the judge paid them off? Or did they just not care? The judge might dispose of his own wife as he wished, and they, as in many communities at home, would turn a blind eye.

Miriam went and greeted Kofi, helping him settle his merchandise in the closet and helping him off with his heavy shoes and on with his slippers. A fresh vegetable stew with tough beef softened by much cooking enticed. While Kofi washed his hands, Miriam went into the bedroom to call Nana to the meal.

But the girl wasn't there.

A chill went through Miriam. When had Nana left? And why had she not returned for her meal? The child might disappear from time to time, but a hearty eater, she never missed dinner.

Miriam's stomach clenched with fear, and she was in no mood to eat, thinking of the girl and the fact that Nana had gone out yesterday with the limo driver, who might be involved in the death of the judge's wife.

Miriam placed a hot bowl of food in front of Kofi, already seated at the table, and announced she had to go out at once.

Kofi gave her a censorious look but put nothing in words. So Miriam took his silence as permission and hurried into her coat. She was tired after so many trips out today and walking up and down the stairs so many times. But she didn't hesitate. The Judge Newcomb Community Service Center was her goal.

**T**he car was outside the building. Miriam didn't know whether to be easier in her mind or even more fearful than she had been. What did the limo being here indicate? Well, at least Nana hadn't driven off with Wallace to a deserted spot where she would be strangled.

And there came the driver, lightly springing down the front steps with an athlete's self-confidence. He smiled at Miriam, which inclined her to feel a modicum of relief. "Hello, Mama," he said, and a spasm of horror ran through her. That he knew what Nana called her disturbed Miriam deeply.

"Where is my daughter Nana?" she demanded.

"Oh, she's inside," he said with absolute calm. "Caldrone, the office manager, promised her a job."

Maybe this boded well, but Miriam's impulse was to respond with indignation. *A job? How dare he?*

"No," she said. "Not my Nana. Not here. You are the man who made a dump job of Ellen Newcomb. Our Nana will not become a dump job at your hands."

Wallace's eyes widened at the same time that the rest of his face suddenly collapsed. "I... Yes. It's true." He closed those large eyes and put his palms up over them. Then he took away his hands and faced his accuser. "She'd taken an overdose of heroin, and if they

found her here, the judge was sure to be in the center of ugly news reports. So we took her to the park to leave her there. I feel sorry about that. It's wrong, I suppose, but not horribly wrong." Without words, he begged Miriam to understand.

"So, the judge was willing to make a dump job of his own wife," she observed. She waited for that final admission.

"Not the judge. Of course not the judge. Mr. Caldron, the judge's office manager."

Mr. Caldron! And Nana was in there with him now. Miriam, had she ever been granted God's grace to become a mother, would not have been a careless one. Not bothering to answer the chauffeur, she ascended the stairs of the townhouse as hastily as she could, a bit worse for an entire day's wear.

Wallace hovered in abashment, then followed her in.

"No, no," Miriam heard Nana call out in shrill tones. Miriam rushed past the barrier of the front desk to rescue the young daughter—well, co-wife—from being raped, Wallace close behind her.

But the only part of Nana Miriam found exposed in the private room beyond was an arm. And the man Caldron stood with a needle.

He turned with the noise of Miriam and Wallace entering and Miriam's shout for him to stop.

"It's not me," said Caldron, dropping the syringe and retreating from Miriam, now advancing on him, the flat of her palm raised and her eyes on fire with an instantaneous fury. "The woman asked for the drug."

Miriam came alongside, slapped the man hard, and released the girl from his grip. Then pulling the sweater sleeve down over the tender young flesh, she held the woman's hand warmly in reassurance. This was the killer, Miriam realized. He, all along. Maybe he had addicted Ellen Newcomb or maybe not, but he had certainly supplied the drug. And, accident or plan, Ellen Newcomb had died, and Caldron had dumped her.

A short, balding black man peeked out of the corner office. Miriam recognized the judge from his picture on the wall.

And Miriam told the judge directly how his wife had been dumped by the same man trying to force the needle into her own daughter's arm, and that maybe Caldron had actually killed the judge's wife.

Miriam and Nana stared at the judge. Did he care? Miriam wondered. Had he himself ordered the dump job?

But before her eyes, the judge slowly, then with more conviction, began to weep.





"He was trying to seduce me," said Nana in annoyance hours later, after they had been driven home by the police. "That ugly man! And so old!" Of course, the man was nowhere near the advanced age of her own husband, Kofi, but then Kofi had been unable to force his attentions on the girl.

"Poor Wallace," Nana added. "Do you think he'll have to go to jail too?"

"No," answered Miriam with assurance. "On television the one who is so much less guilty will turn state's evidence." She believed that was the phrase. "The poor judge," added Miriam. "He's the one I feel sorry for. He loved his wife."

"She was very pretty," Nana said. "I suppose the other man seduced her with the drug, the way he tried to do to me." She drew herself up in the couch that served each night as her bed. "I, however, am not so foolish a girl."

"Well, why in the world did you go over there?" asked Miriam severely.

"I thought maybe we could both get a peddler's license," the girl answered, an eager desire shooting through her voice.

"Our husband will take care of us," objected Miriam, hoping to soothe her.

"For now," said Nana, lying back against her pillow. "But one day I will have a job of my own. With a job, no one will be able to turn me out whenever they want. I will make my own way in the world."

"Ah," whispered her older co-wife with approval. "For once, I think you show a great deal of sense." 🐦



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# MOTHER BRIMSTONE

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JAMES LINCOLN WARREN

SE'ARCHER. *n.s.*  
[from *search*]

2. Officer in London appointed to examine the bodies of the dead, and report the cause of death.

The *searchers*, who are ancient matrons sworn to their office, repair to the place where the dead corps lies, and by view of the same, and by other inquiries, examine by what disease the corps died. *Graunt's Bills of Mortality*.

—*Johnson's Dictionary*, 1755

**T**emper, Emma Stavacre thought, inhaling deeply, is of an incendiary nature, whether it erupts in the solitary flash and report of a squib, thus extinguishing itself almost as if it had never been, or instead glows slowly and long, like a resentful ember in a bed of ashes, biding its time until bursting into an all-devouring flame. Fire has its uses, to be sure—one might cook by it, or bake bricks by it, or warm oneself by it in the cold and darkness—and temper has its uses too, foremost among them as fuel for the righteous castigation of fools. But wrath, the Church teaches us, is a deadly sin, and so is pride. Temper should be—tempered.

She slowly let out her breath, closed her eyes, and struggled to maintain her composure. Dr. Henry Driffill, vicar of the London parish of Saint Katherine Creechurch, stood at the threshold, benevolently smiling, taking up the entire doorway with his rotund bulk. As Mrs. Stavacre was short, she found herself looking up into his broad nostrils.

Dr. Driffill was a man of great erudition but little sense, one whose sincere compassion was made absurd by an irksome and ostentatious manner. She knew he was only doing his duty in visiting her, a widow, and that his sanguine charity was nothing she ought to resent so strongly, but he had arrived, almost predictably, at a most inconvenient moment.



Her recently married daughter Nancy had quarrelled with her new husband and showed up on the doorstep that morning in company with her personal maid and her entire and extensive wardrobe, and as Mrs. Stavacre had let her children's rooms since they had all grown, there was no place to put anything, and worse, Nan perforce must share Mrs. Stavacre's bed, there being no other available. In addition, Nancy's lady's maid Irma had already insulted Mrs. Stavacre's awkward housemaid, who answered to the even more awkward name of Tulip and was her only servant, and who was now up in the attic agonising, sulking, and disconsolately weeping for her unappreciated station in life in lieu of attending to her duties. Which was why Mrs. Stavacre had been forced to answer the knock at the door in her own person.

"Dr. Driffill," she said, smiling and successfully not grinding her teeth. "How thoughtful of you to call."

"If I were but only doing my pastoral duty—" as if anything about a parish in the middle of this great city could be considered pastoral, "—in bringing solace to the needy, I should have hesitated to come, indeed I should, cognizant as I am, indeed, and duly appreciative, of your, erm, peculiar preference for, erm, your independence."

Mrs. Stavacre raised an eyebrow. She had not credited Dr. Driffill with as much perception.

The rest came out in a rush: "—but truth be told, I was reminded by our Mr. Butters, that the late and estimable Mr. Stavacre was a trusted, indeed, one might not blanch at the description, an accomplished and respected apothecary, and that he depended upon you, even as fully as any Oriental caliph has ever done, upon any grand vizier."

"Would you like to come in?" Mrs. Stavacre asked, standing aside so that Dr. Driffill might move his almost globular torso toward the drawing room. She herself did not harbour any sentimental recollections of her husband and was unmoved by Dr. Driffill's flattery of him. Early in their marriage, she had realised that Humphrey Stavacre was a charming scoundrel, an unfit and disloyal husband, an overindulgent father who used bribery as a surrogate for love, even as he provided his family with a comfortable home. It was true that he had been a gifted chymist, maugre of his wayward character.

"Indeed, I should like it above all things," said Dr. Driffill, relief evident on his pudgy face. With something of a revelation, Mrs. Stavacre realized that Dr. Driffill was intimidated by her. It made her wonder if she had somehow earned a reputation as a shrew, and that made her temper threaten to flare up again.

"Please, come in, sir, and I shall see to tea," she responded, trying hard to be gracious. She had been obliged to prepare the morning's tea herself, of course. Without warning, Nan came flying down the narrow stairs, her fine broad skirts barely impeding her progress—her mother's modest existence offered no hindrance to her own zealous allegiance to vanity—a letter from her estranged spouse clenched in her hand. The paper fluttered like a startled pigeon as she held it before her. Even in her agitation, she was perhaps a touch too glamorous: Her dress was more appropriate to the evening amusements of Carlisle House than to the daylight routines of the Stavacre house. "Mama, why did you not tell me ere I married that all men are reptiles?" she passionately cried. "The—the beast! Did I not deserve some warning?"

"Nan, I'm sure you remember Dr. Driffill," said Mrs. Stavacre, threateningly calm. Nan froze, blushed violently, placed her hands behind her in order to hide the letter, and then smiled as prettily as if she were posing for Mr. Gainsborough. "Dr. Driffill, a pleasure." She wisely did not attempt to curtsy on the stairs.

"Your servant, Mrs. Templedon," the vicar replied, bowing, himself blushing.

"Of course I did not mean all men, certainly not men of the cloth—" Nan began to explain, but her mother mercifully cut her off.

"I'm sure Dr. Driffill understands the tempests accompanying the accommodation of a young bride into an unaccustomed matrimony," she said, her eyes shifting pointedly back up the stairs, twice.

"Pray excuse my passion, sir," Nan said, smiling, then frowning, and then smiling again. She hesitated, torn between embarrassment and the compulsion to seek her mother's solace, or at least attention, and then fairly fled back up the stairs.

Dr. Driffill's eyes, meanwhile, were fixed on the floor.

"I believe you had accepted the invitation to partake of tea?" Mrs. Stavacre asked gently. She could see that Dr. Driffill was still somewhat discommoded by Nan's outburst, and felt a sudden pang of pity for him, something she rarely felt even for intelligent and compassionate fools.

"I have no conception of what to do about Nan," she said.

"I should only be too happy to speak with her," said Dr. Driffill sagaciously, "for I know only too well the sort of derangement to which a young and innocent female mind may be prone."

"I might, then, suggest to her that she seek your counsel," Mrs. Stavacre said, intending no such thing.

The vicar and the widow finally seated themselves in the parlour, and Mrs. Stavacre poured.

"I shall come to the point of my visit, ma'am," Dr. Driffill said. "I

mentioned Mr. Butters, who, as you know, is the charlie—" Dr. Driffill paused on the familiar term, as if it were unseemly for a man of the cloth to indulge in vulgar speech, and quickly substituted the official one.—"that is, the night watchman, of our parish."

Mrs. Stavacre briefly wondered what that vigorous and merry monarch King Charles II, who had established the office, would have thought of old men without other prospects of employment being named in his honour. Although ostensibly endowed with the powers of a constable, charlies in fact had little or no authority. Even now in 1769, the English (and particularly Londoners) constitutionally abhorred the idea of police, which they regarded as a potential threat to their personal liberty and their cherished right to assemble into rampaging mobs at the slightest provocation. True, Sir John Fielding's Bow Street Runners were now seen all over the City, and they had managed to reduce crime somewhat, but they were not loved.

Dr. Driffill continued. "'Twas he suggested your name, recollecting the universal regard inspired by your late husband. Ma'am, will you be pleased to assume the office—"

Mrs. Stavacre blinked. "Office, sir— What office—"

"The office of searcher, of course; did I not mention it? Mrs. Sharples, who has held that position these many years, is no longer as hale as once she was and feels she may no longer discharge those duties with the same dispatch as was her custom."

"In that case, I accept."

"I am certain you shall wish to consider this proposal at your leisure, and I may only admonish you with considering the general welfare of the par— You accept? Did you say that you accept?"

"Yes, sir. With alacrity."

Dr. Driffill paused, at a loss for words, a caesura that naturally was not long-lived, and then stood. "Then I suppose there is nothing left to be said, except for the expression of my sincerest gratitude, that you should thus benefit our excellent parish, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the nature of those duties so often distressful to your delicate sex—"

"I shall, of course, need to learn the proper manner of entering the bills of mortality into the parish records," Mrs. Stavacre remarked thoughtfully, as if she were unaware she had interrupted the vicar. "Shall I call on you this afternoon for instruction?"

"Why, yes. Of course. Splendid."

She wasted no time in ushering him out into Billings Lane. No sooner had the door closed than Nan, who had been hovering by the balustrade on the first floor, seized the opportunity once again to surge downstairs, the offending letter before her.



"The vile creature durst write, he accuses me, me, who only cares for his excellent reputation before persons of quality, of being spoilt, just because I—"

"Because you give yourself such airs? Look at you, dressed like a, a duchess in the afternoon. The afternoon! I should say that you are spoilt indeed."

"Do not be jealous of me, Mama, that I, at least, have pretty things."

At that moment, the sputtering slow match of Mrs. Stavacre's temper at last breached its keg, with dazzling results.

Saint Katherine Creechurch was generally a quiet parish. Mr. Butters preferred it so, not because it palliated his unpleasant labours, but because it informed him that his diligence in performing them was effective. It meant that he had something to show for his vigilant attention to duty.

To ensure the continuance of parish tranquillity, Mr. Butters was not satisfied only to patrol its more well-lit avenues, where mischief in any case was unlikely to expose itself. Holding his lantern before him like a latter-day Diogenes, therefore, he frequented the alleys and rookeries by night, believing that the presence of his light would, in most cases, be sufficient to chase away the powers of darkness.

It was in one such nameless alley that he saw, at the limit of his lantern's light, two women furtively lifting a bundle onto a cart, where no two women should be at such an hour.

"'ere, then, what's this?" he cried.

The two women immediately took flight. He had a fleeting impression of their dresses gleaming like satin in the low light as they fled. At the same time, the cart driver snapped his whip, and the dray horse broke into an instantaneous canter. Even with the aid of his staff, Mr. Butters was unable to keep up with any of them.

In their precipitate haste, the women had not finished their loading. The bundle fell off the cart as it pulled away, then bounced hard against the back wall of a tenement before coming to rest on the cobblestones. By the time he reached it, Mr. Butters could see that it was an unconscious woman, wrapped in burlap. She, at least, wore not silk, but black-dyed wool.

He held the lantern close to see her face.

And recoiled in horror.

Billy Butters had been a sergeant in Cumberland's army at the battle of Culloden nearly a quarter-century before. Sergeants are men of great consequence, none more so, and not even monarchs, attach more prestige to their dignity.

He thought of his long staff as a badge of his imposing office; it did not occur to him that without it, he wouldn't have had the mobility to make his rounds. He was too proud of his soldierly past ever to admit that he was not the man he had once been. After all, he had faced cannon, musket, and blood-smeared claymore and never flinched. But pride notwithstanding, no man is without fear.

It is proverbial that in war, for every soldier who dies of a wound inflicted by the enemy, a dozen more succumb to disease and fever. Billy Butters had firsthand knowledge of the truth of this conventional wisdom, and his special terror, his personal vision of painful damnation and a sulphurous hell, was not death by cold blade, nor burning shot, nor even splattering and stinking bomb: It was the horror of plague.

Mr. Butters would never have admitted he was afraid. He attributed his shortness of breath and accelerated heartbeat not to any panic, but to his haste in repairing to Mrs. Stavacre's doorstep. He was even unaware that he kept his distance as Mrs. Stavacre kneeled at the corpse in the rookery gutter.

"Mr. Butters, please bring the lantern closer."

"'er skin, 'tis bluisk, marm. It ain't—It ain't the plague, please God?" he whispered.

"Certainly not. But if you don't bring the light closer, I shall not be able to determine what, in fact, it is."

Butters shuffled in closer and held the light up so that Mrs. Stavacre might get a better look.

"Winsome young thing," Mrs. Stavacre said. "What do you make of her, Mr. Butters?"

"A young domestic, I should say. She be wearin' a domestic's dress."

Mrs. Stavacre frowned. "Domestic? I think not. Look at her hands. Her nails are clean. Let's examine her knees, shall we?"

Mr. Butters averted his eyes as Mrs. Stavacre pulled the dead girl's frock up to expose her knees.

"As soft as cotton, they are," Mrs. Stavacre said. Butters clenched his eyes shut at such an indecent image. "What kind of housemaid has clean fingernails and uncalled knees?"

"Then 'o is she?"

Mrs. Stavacre lifted her head. "What beautiful hair she has, like spun flax. Did you notice that it is damp?"

Butters pursed his lips before mumbling, "No, marm."

"And it smells of tobacco—not your Virginia tobacco, nor your molasses twist—methinks I detect an Oriental spiciness to it. Turkish, I should imagine."

"Surely not, marm." The image of a woman smoking was not to be borne.

Mrs. Stavacre pushed one of the corpse's eyes open. "Do bring the lantern in closer, Mr. Butters. There. Do you see it? Her pupils are small as pinpricks. What beautiful eyes they must have been whilst living, as blue as a summer sky."

Mr. Butters had seen many soulless stares on the battlefield, but he had never considered what they would have been like absent death.

"Not lady, nor spinster, nor maid, nor even yet maiden, by the look of things," Mrs. Stavacre said, rising at last. "Pretty, clean, and pampered, I should say, and yet so far below the consideration of her acquaintances that she has been thus abandoned to the discovery of strangers. Surely that tells the story."

"What story?"

"The story, Mr. Butters, of how we happened to stumble upon the cadaver of a murdered whore."

"Murther?" Dr. Driffill's normally pink and self-satisfied face was a white circle of shock. Billy Butters leaned against the door of the vicarage and stared at the floorboards, unwilling to see Dr. Driffill stripped of his clerical habiliments' decorum, clad as the priest was in nothing but nightshirt and cap.

"Somewhere in this parish, there is a brothel in uproar," Mrs. Stavacre said. "I need to know where it is, if I am to conduct the necessary enquiries."

"By what evidence do you conclude that this unfortunate wench was—murdered?" Mrs. Stavacre seemed not to notice the question but continued with her own train of thought. "A bordello of some luxury, I should say, the sort to appeal to men of means, and doing trade in the guise of a Turkish bagnio. Be there any such in the neighbourhood?"

"A brothel? I—I—I'm a clergyman, Mrs. Stavacre!"

"Tut, tut. Clergymen—or at least high church clergymen, of which we know you to be one—do hear confessions, Dr. Driffill. While I accept that the confessional is sacrosanct, you cannot be ignorant of the Devil's footholds in your own parish, surely."

"You avoid my question, ma'am. How can you know that this poor girl was murdered?"

Mrs. Stavacre closed her eyes and sighed. "Very good. Let us first ask ourselves in what manner she did expire."

"Yes, precisely, by all means, for that is your purpose, and there your responsibilities end, forsooth."

"End? Not at all, sir. 'Tis where they begin. After dedicating some thought to the matter, as required by the mandate of my new office, I have come to certain conclusions regarding this strange death—but which raise other questions, forsooth."

"What other questions can there be?"

"Attend, sir. On first examination, one might conclude by her colouration that she died of the blue jaundice, which is to say, a condition of the heart. But blueness of the skin can also be caused by asphyxiation, sir, and while her body was dry, her hair was damp, and she was unnaturally clean."

"I fail to see the significance."

"Isn't it obvious that she was drowned in a bath?" Mrs. Stavacre said, a little more sharply than she had intended. "Her body was dried with a towel, and then clothed as a servant, but you cannot get such a head of hair as hers completely dry by such means, nor introduce a servant's scars by changing raiment. Her head had been immersed in clean water. She certainly didn't drown in the stink of the Thames."

Dr. Driffill's mouth formed an O. Regaining his wits, he asked, "But could it not have been simple mischance?"

"That being the case, then tell me, sir, why ever was her body being so unceremoniously dumped onto a cart by two richly dressed women, and in the dead of night? The cart, no doubt, was being driven by a sack-'em-up man; the body was surely destined for a surgical theatre. Her beauty, not to mention her identity, would not long survive her being anatomised, and that is a strongly suggestive fact, sir. They must have had strong reasons to rid themselves so completely of the corpse, and what stronger reason could there be than the occultation of a crime?"

"But you said there were no signs of violence upon the body."

"Not violence, no, but I never said there were no indicia of foul play. The pupils of her eyes were abnormally contracted, sir, even in the darkness of night. Why? Had she not, perhaps, been dosed with a surfeit of laudanum? Such a poisoning would well account for their unusual condition, sir. It would also explain the absence of any marks of force because, being in a state of morbose toxication, she couldn't possibly have put up any sort of resistance."

Dr. Driffill covered his eyes with his right hand. When he spoke, it was in a low, disturbed voice. "What you are suggesting is truly monstrous."

"Indeed, it is, sir," she agreed. "And so I ask you, are we to suffer such an enormity in our own parish?"

"No," he said dully. "I should hope never. I suppose you deduced the bagnio from the scent of Turk tobacco rising from her hair."

"That was the smallest piece of the puzzle. A dead beauty, her lifeless form carefully laved, and she without any apparent connexion. What else could she be but a strumpet? And where are we to find strumpets and baths in the same place but in a bagnio?"

Dr. Driffill clenched his eyes shut. He was obviously struggling with himself. Finally, he opened them, a sad expression on his face, and he said, "I believe there is such a place, but I would not have you storm its hellish gates without succour. It is the particular dominion of a woman I believe to be one of the most vicious procuresses in London, whose delight in the most degrading species of sin marks her as a minion of Satan. No one I have ever spoken with has knowledge of her true name, but—I suppose you might call it her *nom de guerre*—is Mrs. Brimstone."

"Such a name indicates that she is obvious in her loyalties, at least," Mrs. Stavacre replied dryly. "As for succour, have no misdoubts that I shall be very careful of my safety, and believe that any escort to the premises would serve to hinder rather than help me in finding out the truth. Also, I fear the consequences of my suspicions being generally learnt and would not wish them to be shared unnecessarily, not with anyone. You understand what consequences I mean."

Mr. Butters grunted.

"I do, indeed, madam," Dr. Driffill said, shaking his head. "But I do wish that you would reconsider the wisdom; and yes, the propriety, of visiting such a den of iniquity alone."

"The vicar's right, there, marm," mumbled Mr. Butters. "At the very least, I should go with ye, especially if there's been murder done."

"Pish. I shall be perfectly all right."

By the time Mrs. Stavacre at last stood before the door of Mrs. Brimstone's bagnio, dawn was not far off. The torches mounted on the walls of the buildings were burning low, and the sky in the east was perceptibly brightening. Vendors and mongers had already begun their day.

Mrs. Stavacre was tired and annoyed. The back of the house abutted on the very alley where the dead girl had been found—one might have thought that Mr. Butters, at least, would have recognised the significance of such a fact, but no.

She was also annoyed that the large, respectable-looking house before her was known to her, although it would have to be a rare edifice in the neighbourhood of which she could be utterly unaware. She had always thought it to be the home of a rich commercial citizen and had not heretofore detected any activity about it that might have suggested its secret, which, to be sure, she reminded herself, she had never looked for. That is, until now: A young redcoat officer, unshaven and drunk, casually altered his direction when he perceived her standing on the threshold of his destination.

Her knock was answered by a liveried footman, who seemed not at all to be disturbed by the importunity of a woman in the dark at the entrance to a house of assignation. He was tall and broad shouldered, with large hands, but not rude looking.

"My name is Mrs. Stavacre," she said, trying not to sound nervous. "I have some business with Mrs. Brimstone."

"Come in, marm. I will see if the lady of the house is receiving."

She was shown into a spacious and elegant anteroom, appointed with Oriental luxuries, silk draperies, tall hookahs, gold brocaded pillows, but which contained, perhaps, too many places for visitors to sit. At the far end of the room, below a balustrade at the top of a double flying staircase, was a tall double door, which Mrs. Stavacre surmised must lead to the baths.

The footman closed the front door behind him, bade Mrs. Stavacre sit on a fine chair, then bowed and departed, mounting the stairs to the left. After several minutes, he returned and said that Mrs. Brimstone would be pleased to receive Mrs. Stavacre in her boudoir, she (Mrs. Brimstone) being abed at such an hour but nevertheless awake.

The footman led her up three flights of stairs and to a large door. He knocked gently and entered. She could hear the rumble of his voice through the door, and then he came back onto the landing, bowed again, and gestured to her that she should enter.

The room was large and dominated by a huge canopied bed and tall, curtained windows. Candles, good wax candles, cast an amber light on its rich appointments. Mrs. Brimstone lay on the bed, propped up by several soft pillows large enough to have served as children's mattresses.

Mrs. Stavacre's final consternation was that she recognised the woman. She had never known her name but had seen her several times and had always imagined she was a lady. She was not remotely the loud, coarse, and fat madam Mrs. Stavacre had expected.

She was not much younger than Mrs. Stavacre herself, being certainly younger than fifty, and although her face lacked the resilience of youth, it was a fine face, one that must have shone with beauty in its prime. Wisps of hair protruded from her night-cap like tendrils of ivy, and in the candlelight, they appeared to be the colour of butter.

"Mrs. Stavacre," Mrs. Brimstone said, her voice a measured contralto, her eyes half shut with ennui, "if you have come to enquire as to your husband, let me assure you, I have not seen nor heard of him these three years."

Stunned, Mrs. Stavacre recovered quickly and with a rush of pique.



"I should hope not," she replied icily, "as he has since found a more permanent place of repose than a trollop's bed. He is in the grave, Mrs. Brimstone, for all the pleasure it will now afford him. I have come not to enquire after him—I am as certain of his location now, as I was formerly uncertain of it—but have come to enquire after a quite different departed soul. You may be unaware that I have recently accepted appointment as the searcher for this parish."

"Then you are in the wrong place, Mrs. Stavacre." Mrs. Brimstone reached for the bell rope and gave it a languid pull. "There have been no deaths here. I treat my girls as if they were my own children and spare nothing in my care for them."

"Of course you spare nothing, Mrs. Brimstone, least of all love, or what you may conceive as love. Love is your trade, is it not? Do you not depend on your girls and their trade in love for your every emolument?"

"Not for every emolument, I assure you. But I find you tedious, Mrs. Stavacre, something I could never abide. I suffered your admission because your husband—forgive me, I mean, your late husband—was once a generous friend. Now I perceive we have nothing whatever to say to one another."

"You mean, now that you have had your gloat, there is nothing left for you to say. You are wrong. I care not one whit about the unlamented Mr. Stavacre and his indiscretions. I only want to know who the girl was, Mrs. Brimstone, the dead flaxen-haired girl abandoned in the alley behind this very building and why it was she had to die."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I believe that you do. It is the duty of my office that I must learn the identity of the young woman who was poisoned and then drowned here."

"You are . . . fantastic, Mrs. Stavacre."

Mrs. Stavacre curled her lip in contempt. "Is it fantastic to imagine that you mayhap discovered a lovely young girl just arrived in London, alone at a coaching inn, recently come from the country where she was greatly admired for her beauty by the local youth, but now, even finding herself friendless and alone, still overflowed with hope for the prospect of an exciting new life in the City? Can it be fantastic that you took the opportunity to befriend and then corrupt her, as you have so many before her? Is such a story fantasy? Isn't it instead the reality?"

The door opened. The footman had answered his mistress's summons.

"Mrs. Stavacre is leaving, Gudge. I regret that I will not be receiving her again at any time in the future," said Mrs. Brimstone, her voice level.

"This way, marm," said Gudge, taking her by the elbow.

"Remove your hand from me, you baboon," Mrs. Stavacre said scathingly. "I am not to be manhandled by the likes of you."

"Don' make me get rough," Gudge growled. He tweaked her elbow, and she nearly cried out in pain. But her anger was stronger.

"Never," said Mrs. Stavacre. "You have laudanum for that purpose, I don't misdoubt."

Gudge dropped her arm. "I had nowt to do with any o' that."

Mrs. Stavacre sniffed. "What do you say now, Mrs. Brimstone?"

"Gudge, do shut up," Mrs. Brimstone said, her voice dripping with ennui. "She's only an old woman, angry and jealous, because her husband preferred my company to hers, as whose shouldn't? Take her away."

"That is the second time in the last few days I have been called jealous," Mrs. Stavacre said, her voice vibrating with anger. "Now, as then, such a grotesque charge is wholly in error. I do not see how I possibly could be—no, I simply cannot be jealous of a bawd—a lewd and avaricious bawd, not to mention a murderess."

Mrs. Brimstone's jaws tightened as if she had been struck with tetanus. For the first time, she looked directly into Mrs. Stavacre's face. Her eyes were a cerulean blue. Mrs. Stavacre's breath stopped. She numbly realized how beautiful such eyes were in the countenance of one living.

Gudge grabbed Mrs. Stavacre's arm again and forcibly withdrew her from the room. She was too wise to offer resistance to such a strong man. He dragged her down the stairs. As they reached the first floor landing, an insistent knock sounded upon the front door. Gudge hesitated.

"That will be, as you might say, a gentleman, if I am not mistaken," Mrs. Stavacre said. She smirked. "I wonder what he will think, seeing you attend me."

"Righ'," Gudge said, and pulling her to one side, he opened the door closest to him. It was a massive door, oaken and unpainted, and fitted with a heavy iron lock. He pushed Mrs. Stavacre into the windowless room and growled, "Don' worry. I'll be back for you soon's I see to the—gen'leman."

He slammed the door shut, and Mrs. Stavacre heard the key turn in the lock. Her anger had been cooled by the trip downstairs, and now, for the first time, she felt afraid. Her first impulse was to pound heavily on the door and demand her release, but as she raised her fists, she thought of Gudge's size and grim demeanour, and her resolve failed her.

She nearly panicked.

Instead, she was shocked to her senses. It was a voice that did it.

A young, scared, girlish voice. Mrs. Stavacre was not alone in the room.

"Go away!" the voice entreated, and in it, Mrs. Stavacre heard every fear her own children had expressed many years before, in thunderstorm and in fever. It was the voice of a child, an innocent, a mere lamb. The timbre of it nearly broke her heart.

"Hush," Mrs. Stavacre said softly, turning to look at the girl in the dim light. "I shall never harm thee, so help me God."

The girl was perhaps fourteen, possibly younger, doe-eyed, and as slender as an oboe, with long, thin brown hair. She had been stripped of all her clothing, and she held her bedsheets before her slim body, for all the meagre protection it could afford.

Seething abhorrence for Mrs. Brimstone rose spontaneously in Mrs. Stavacre's gorge. She had heard of this perverse practice, this cruel translation of a young girl's very modesty into an instrument of her own captivity.

The girl erupted into tears. "Who—who are you?"

"A parish officer," said Mrs. Stavacre, as soothingly as possible. "If 'tis possible, I would deliver thee."

The girl's reaction was predictable. She had been falsely reassured many times before now. "You lie! You are Mother Brimstone's compeer. You have bought me from her."

"I do not. I am not. I have not. I am her prisoner, just as you are."

"Then how can you deliver me?"

"Do not worry on that account. We shall not long be prisoners," Mrs. Stavacre said, but the words were braver than her feelings. She turned back to the door. Gudge should be returning for her at any moment.

"Polly was not long a prisoner neither," said the girl bitterly, "but she never escaped Mother Brimstone, did she?"

"Polly?" Mrs. Stavacre's attention fixed itself on the girl again. "Is she, might she be, perchance, a young, golden-haired girl, that men might find fetching?"

"Was, as you should say," said the girl.

"She has met her decease, then."

The girl began to sob again.

"But was not Polly—was she not Mrs. Brimstone's own daughter?" Mrs. Stavacre's voice almost caught in her throat. "Their eyes—they have the same eyes."

"Mother Brimstone's own flesh and blood, they say, but she kilt her, didn' she? Just because she was jealous that Mr. Davenport had lost interest in the dam, and preferred to dally with the daughter."

"Mrs. Brimstone forced her own daughter into prostitution and was then jealous of her?" Such an unnatural betrayal seemed even

more ghastly than murder. Mrs. Stavacre was uncomfortably reminded of Nan's accusation of jealousy. She thrust it from her thoughts. "What is your name, child?"

The girl started to cry again. "Fanny, that is, Frances Jones, marm."

"Do not give up hope, Fanny. Despair is a sin."

She looked again at the door. Where was Gudge?

An hour passed, and he did not come. Then another.

Mrs. Stavacre had seated herself on the bed, her feet barely making contact with the floor, when she finally heard the click of the door being unlocked.

Gudge stood behind Mrs. Brimstone herself. Mrs. Brimstone stood erect, tall and imperious as a queen.

"You are an idiot, Gudge," Mrs. Brimstone said acidly. "Of all the places to secrete our searcher, you choose the one room she should never have seen. Stupid, stupid."

"But there was a gen'leman at the door."

"Shut up." Mrs. Brimstone shook her head, then sighed dramatically. "I do regret it, Mrs. Stavacre, but that which must be done, must be done. I cannot possibly allow you to leave my house now. Not whilst one of us lives."

Fanny recoiled behind Mrs. Stavacre, clutching the sheet. "Fanny, leave the room. Go to the baths and wait."

"Fanny is under my protection," said Mrs. Stavacre, boldly. Mrs. Brimstone sneered. "And whose protection are you under, I wonder?"

She reached into her reticule and withdrew a stiletto.

"Marm, no!" whispered Gudge in horror.

Mrs. Brimstone advanced into the room. Mrs. Stavacre looked desperately around for anything that might serve as a weapon. She could see nothing.

But Fanny reached under the bed, her sheet falling to the floor as she did so, and she seized the chamber pot she found there. She wasted no time in flinging it at Mrs. Brimstone, effluvia splashing all over her splendid dress. Mrs. Brimstone succeeded in knocking the pot aside, and it shattered on the floor. She was drenched in stale urine.

"You—cat!" Mrs. Brimstone hissed, lunging for the girl. Mrs. Stavacre seized Mrs. Brimstone's elbow, and the two women fell to the floor. Mrs. Brimstone slashed wildly, and cut the back of Mrs. Stavacre's right arm below the elbow with the knife. Blood poured out of the wound.

"Gudge! Gudge!" Mrs. Brimstone called. But Gudge was not there. Sounds filtered up from the ground floor. A hard thump. A window being smashed. Angry male voices.

"Get off me," Mrs. Stavacre shouted and was surprised when

Mrs. Brimstone obeyed her. Mrs. Brimstone ran to the door and halted.

Ominously, Mrs. Stavacre heard the crackle of flame as she managed to sit up, followed by the even more ominous smell of smoke.

"Dear Lord," she said, managing to stand. "There's a riot."

There were, after all, few amusements more amenable to a mob of apprentices in London than vandalising a bawdy house.

Mrs. Brimstone dropped the stiletto and disappeared into the hallway.

Mrs. Stavacre picked up the sheet from the floor, unaware that she was copiously bleeding all over it, and wrapped it around Fanny, so that she looked like some fair caryatid.

"We must flee, Fanny. Make haste, make haste, or we're done for."

They descended the stairs into the anteroom. The apprentices and several older men had already breached the door and were smashing everything in sight. Several of Mrs. Brimstone's English harlots, ridiculously clad as odalisques, attempted escape, only to be grabbed by their hair or limbs and slammed to the floor to be kicked and beaten by the men. Acrid smoke filled the air as fire climbed the silk hangings.

A smirking young man wielding a club—a broken leg from one of Mrs. Brimstone's fine chairs—stood between them and the door to the street. With a look of savage elation, he brought back his cudgel, preparing to deliver a lethal blow to Mrs. Stavacre's head.

It never arrived. A quarterstaff thumped him from behind, and he collapsed, squealing in pain. A step beyond him, looking haggard and terrified, stood the redoubtable Mr. Butters, former sergeant in the army of the Duke of Cumberland.

He held out a shaking hand to her. "Mrs. Stavacre, we must get away."

They followed him onto the street. There they witnessed Mother Brimstone being tossed like a fork of fouled straw among the gleeful rioters. Only Mr. Butters stood between the two women and the mirthful wrath of the rabble.

His chest was heaving like a bellows when the redcoats finally arrived to quell the violent tumult. Leaning hard on his staff, he slowly led them to Mrs. Stavacre's home. "Lord forgive me," he wheezed on her doorstep, "I'm sorry, marm, I truly am. I never thought it should start a riot."

Her precautions to contain her suspicions of murder and keep them secret had been wasted. Mr. Butters had stood there, silent but not deaf, while she had discussed the matter with Dr. Driffill, and she was certain he had shared them that very night, no doubt encouraged by a free pint in his favourite pub, the gift of a rapt

audience of virtuous young Christians who could not afford to visit opulent brothels, eager for a chance at mischief.

Old soldiers love to tell tales, after all, and their boasts are not always idle, nor without consequences for good or evil.

There was nothing else for Mrs. Stavacre to do with Fanny but take her on as a scullery maid, however ill she could afford it, but her new compensation as searcher did make it barely possible. If she worried about Tulip's reaction to having a rival installed, she did so needlessly. There was finally someone in the house whom Tulip herself could bully with impunity.

The cut in Mrs. Stavacre's arm was not deep, and her experience as an apothecary's widow was sufficient to see it properly dressed. Indeed, she had come out of the brawl relatively unscathed compared to Mrs. Brimstone, who, while she still lived, was unlikely ever to attract another Mr. Davenport, even were she not to hang.

Beyond all expectations, Mrs. Stavacre had returned home to find Nan reconciled with Mr. Templedon. As her graceful daughter climbed into her husband's elegant coach to go home, Mrs. Stavacre grabbed her hand and pressed it to her face.


"I am not jealous of thee, Nancy, my darling," she said, tears coming to her eyes. "I do wish for thee all the joy and happiness, and all the riches and entertainments you could ever desire, even in the whole wide world."

"Mama," said Nan, embarrassed, "do not carry on so. What ever will the neighbours think?"

So the carriage clattered off down Billings Lane, and as it passed, Mrs. Stavacre observed Dr. Driffill approaching her doorstep on foot, swinging his walking stick with a jolly swagger, complacent as ever.

"I perceive Mrs. Templedon has decided to return home? That is delightful news," he said, touching his hat while shallowly bowing to Mrs. Stavacre. "I am glad that my offices were not needed after all."

Irritation stirred within her breast, and not without some effort she suppressed it. Reminding herself of how close she had come to death, she thought of another of the vicar's offices that might have been called for, had Billy Butters been delayed by as much as a single tick of the clock.

Nodding, she smiled. "I daresay we are both glad, sir . . ." 



# BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

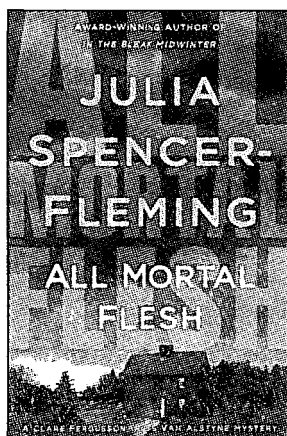
**T**he enormous and prolonged success of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* has spawned a flood of books attempting to capitalize on the book's rapt audience. But religious themes and mysteries have had a long and intimate relationship, and the current crop of offerings shows a variety of themes that owe nothing to the *Code* but rather tackle a slew of prickly problems involving religion and the secular world today.

Julia Spencer-Fleming's *ALL MORTAL FLESH* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$22.95) is the fifth book featuring the tortuous relationship of the Reverend Clare Fergusson and Police Chief Russ Van Alstyne of Millers Kill, New York, and it simmers with all the passion and anguish of a classically ill-fated love affair.

As the story begins, Russ and his wife, Linda, have separated but are trying to work things out, and Clare and Russ have agreed that they must end their relationship, which threatens both Russ' marriage and Clare's career. But those resolutions, made at great emotional cost, disintegrate when Russ' wife is found brutally murdered in their home.

The police force of this small Adirondack town, Russ' own staff, are certain their chief is not guilty of the murder. They are merely observing the formalities demanded before moving on to other possibilities. But once the State Police become involved in the person of Emiley Jensen, Russ is not only removed from the investigation but becomes the primary suspect as well.

Spencer-Fleming elevates her story beyond the trite love triangle by treating her principal characters as reasoning, responsible adults, not lovesick fools blind to the consequences of their actions. Clare is no inexperienced young idealist but a former helicopter pilot who saw combat in Kuwait. She has come to her role as priest relatively late in life, and she struggles mightily to honor both her commitment and her own desires. Russ is not a wandering husband

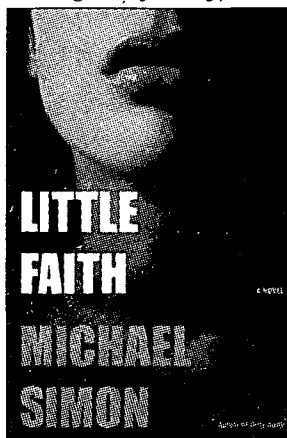


who no longer loves his wife but a man who finds himself in love with two women and no way to reconcile those different loves. Russ, of course, cannot sit idly by while Jensen uses his own police force to try to discover evidence that will convict him. And Clare is not about to leave any avenue unexplored that might free Russ from suspicion.

In addition, Spencer-Fleming's winter setting isn't just scenery; it plays a vital role, and her cast of small town characters mostly avoids the kind of cliché sketching that so many authors provide.

While the most intense light shines on Clare and Russ and their attempts to deal with the scrutiny that a major investigation brings in its wake, the investigation also reveals some surprising secrets about others, and Spencer-Fleming pulls off some twists that should satisfy those who demand that both plot and character be of high caliber.

Michael Simon embeds a variety of religious shadings and issues in his third Dan Reles mystery, *LITTLE FAITH* (Viking, \$23.95), following *Dirty Sally*, and *Body Scissors*.



Reles is a New York Jew transplanted to Austin, Texas, where he is a homicide cop and definitely not one of the good ole boys. After eighteen years in a police department riddled with corruption, Reles is still waiting for pro-motion while lesser cops are elevated over and around him. While watching a promotion ceremony Reles observes: "I'd been blackmailed, set up, shot at, stabbed and bitten, and half the time by cops. I didn't have anything to show for it."

What he gets here is more grief as he tries to handle single-handedly the murder of a former child star fallen on hard times. By swapping favors with Catarina "Cate" Mora, a cop working a missing juvenile case by herself, he doubles his caseload but adds brain power.

Simon lays on complications and sub-plots lavishly: A straight-arrow type becomes head of Internal Affairs; a fellow-cop witnesses a higher-up in a compromising position (literally) with the subject of an ongoing investigation and brings it to Reles; and the activities of Suzanne Addison Wade, wealthy right-wing crusader, and her zealous aide Judah threaten more than a few constitutional rights.

Simon's gritty take on the city's underbelly, his unflattering portrayal of the Austin police force, and his obvious distaste for the politics of Texas's wealthy oil men may turn off some readers. But

Simon tells his tale with brio and gusto, and Dan Reles, for all his faults, is the kind of cop—and the kind of person—that readers will enjoy rooting for now and in future battles.

In the most lighthearted of the three books examined here Jon Breen looks at the effects of a religious conversion on a detective partnership in *EYE OF GOD* (Perseverance Press, \$13.95).

Al Hasp and Norm Carpenter are partners in a reasonably successful detective agency with the easygoing Al providing the people skills and, by most people's judgment, Norm providing the brains. While Al would dispute that, he certainly doesn't want to lose his partner, so when Norm walks into his office and announces that he is resigning as soon as he can clear his desk, Al can't believe it. And when Norm explains that he has "given my life to Jesus Christ" and thinks working for the agency would "hinder his walk" (with the Lord), Al hits the roof.

But before Norm can finish the process of resigning, the agency gets a new client—one that the sly Al can use as a lever to keep Norm aboard. Noted televangelist Vincent Majors wants to hire the firm to investigate a leak in his own organization that has already proved embarrassing and could prove disastrous. Soon the firm (including Norm) is involved in a case that reaches into Majors's powerful and polished operation; into the home of Majors's less-than-dutiful daughter and her husband; and even into the operation of Sonrise College, which prides itself on its basketball program and its spiritual heritage.

Sprightly writing allows Breen to tackle serious subjects with a light touch. While Al is inclined to poke fun at excesses of religion, Norm takes faith seriously, and the result is a nicely balanced approach that is neither impious nor overly credulous.

Breen's complex plot may seem confusing at times, with a rather large cast and any number of angles to keep track of, but Breen untangles it all with a magician's flourish at the satisfying end.

**ALL POINTS BULLETIN: THESE GUNS FOR HIRE**, a collection of hitmen tales, edited by AHMM alum J. A. Konrath, features stories by Jeremiah Healy, Ed Gorman, Rob Kantner, and Lawrence Block. The book debuted in October from Bleak House Books. • Brendan DuBois, Steve Hockensmith, P. J. Parrish, Tom Savage, and Jim Fusilli are just a few of the authors included in **MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA PRESENTS: DEATH DO US PART**, an anthology of new stories about love, lust, and murder, out from Little, Brown in August • When a Holocaust survivor turns up dead, police rule it a suicide, but the victim's brother suspects foul play in Muriel Moulton's new novel **A PRAYER FOR GERSHON LEVIN**, out last July from Rabid Press.

# SANGRIA

GARY ALEXANDER

“**T**his is swill,” says Marshall Bascombe.

Heather Bascombe says, “What did you expect? Look where we are, an outdoor café on a plaza, by a sandwich board for their paella. I suggested this place for the people-watching. This is tourist sangria.”

Bascombe sniffs his glass and writes: *Is a taste of brandy or rum asking too much?*

Heather is half focused on her British tabloid. English language reading material is scarce in Córdoba, Spain. Looking above a piece on royal family misbehavior, she gasps.

“Oh my God!”

“What?”

“It’s him.”

Bascombe guesses who *him* is, *him* who has turned his wife’s tanned cheeks to skim milk. Sure enough, across the plaza, coming out of a restaurant with an arrogant swagger, is Fred Smithert. He’s roly-poly and beady eyed, a self-caricature of the grasping and inept CEO, the bumptious robber baron of the new century.

A driver opens a rear door of a large black BMW. Smithert gets in, and they accelerate around the corner of a street not much wider than the car. Heather takes down the license plate number.

“Are you all right, dear?” Marshall asks, aware that she isn’t.

“Couldn’t be better,” Heather says, trembling.

He jots in his notebook before he forgets: *It’s nigh impossible to identify the red wine base, masked as it is by an alien saccharine beverage.*

Marshall Bascombe’s *The Ultimate Libation* is syndicated in ninety-three newspapers. He’s done rum punch in Grenada, Blue Hawaiis in Honolulu, saké in Osaka, pilsner in Pilsen. Now he’s evaluating Spain’s fabled sangria. A book of Bascombe’s columns cobbled together made the bestseller lists. Marshall Bascombe is handsomely paid for drinking his way around the world.

“You’re not convincing, dear,” he says.

“I’d like to spit in his face,” Heather says. “Tell him what I think of him.”

“That’s all?”

She says, "It just occurred to me that sangria comes from the Spanish word *sangre*, for blood. *Sangria* means bleeding."

Marshall Bascombe peers into the blue blue sky. Córdoba is in the Andalusia region, the sun-basted heart of southern Spain. It is eighty degrees, a glorious autumn afternoon. Bascombe has goose-bumps.

They lay in bed, listening to the hum of the air-conditioner. Heather's headache is genuine tonight.

"I minored in Spanish," she says.

"I know, dear."

"There was a name and phone number on the license plate bracket, like a leasing company. If only we had the time."

They're planning to explore Andalusia, researching indigenous libations. They have reservations on the morning train to Sevilla.

"I could give them a story," Heather says. "I was at the luncheon party and left something in Señor Smithert's car."

For over seventeen years, Heather Johnstone had been a technical writer at the corporation Fred Smithert ran. After he made a train wreck of the company, Smithert resigned abruptly and has been in Europe ever since.

Heather lost most of her 401(k) when the company's stock nose-dived. The promised severance package was drastically reduced for lack of funds, the medical benefits eliminated entirely. The pension fund was a shell. Heather was destitute, no employment prospects in sight, with two sons in college and a deadbeat ex-husband.

The Bascombes met at a writers' conference six months ago, Marshall speaking on panels, discussing the limited prospects of newspaper freelancing. He had been so sweet and patient answering questions, especially Heather's.

Marshall hired her as an assistant on their third date and popped the question on the fourth. He's fifty-eight years old and looks it; she's forty-five and doesn't. He is smitten beyond smitten and doesn't care that people regard Heather as a purchase.

For her part, Heather isn't sure if she can learn to love Marshall. She likes him and she has sufficient work to feel useful. That's a start.

"Tomorrow, Marshall? We could rent a car at the same agency."

"Yes, dear," Marshall says, the only possible answer. "We can certainly stay another day."

Heather sits white-knuckled in the passenger seat. Hating harum-scarum European traffic, she reluctantly asked Marshall to drive. She's regretting her choice. How much can a taxi cost?

Marshall Bascombe is in the far left lane on the auto-estrada, doing fifty miles per hour. Powerful automobiles like Fred Smithert's race up to them, headlamps flashing angrily, buffeting their tiny rental car as they blur by at twice their speed.

"Toward the end, we called him Fred Satan," Heather says.

Bascombe nods. He's heard this before.

"None of the worker bees at the branch ever met Smithert personally. Only the managers. He'd come to town once a year. The branch took a conference room at a hotel. We'd file in and listen to him orate how the company was on the upswing thanks to his initiatives. We called them state visits."

*The chunked fruit in the sangria pitcher should be citrus, preferably oranges. Apples and pears tend to absorb the liquor, be it rum or brandy.* "I remember, dear."

"Smithert was brought in three years ago to 'turn us around.' We were making money, but weren't among the industry leaders." She makes quote marks with her fingers. "Fred Smithert was going to make us 'world-class.'"

They're at the edge of the burbs. Rugged scrub is ahead. Bascombe is reminded of Hemingway, of the Spanish Civil War, of savage hill fighting. He slows, not wanting to miss the turnoff.

"Marshall, please get out of this lane before we're killed. Do you know when we knew the company was in big-time trouble?"

The corporate jet, Bascombe thinks, veering to the right-hand lane as horns bleat.

"The corporate jet," Heather says. "Home office was in Minneapolis. Smithert lived in Maryland. The company bought him a Minneapolis penthouse. He commuted to Maryland on weekends in the jet."

"A bad decision by the board of directors," Bascombe says, seeing their exit.

"For everybody except Smithert. My fellow discarded correspondent in e-mail that we should pass the hat and hire a hit man to get Fred Satan."

"Spitting in his face is inappropriate, dear," he says. "Let alone murder."

"Spitting in his face, figuratively. I'm joking, okay?"

An ascending road winds past gated compounds. The community isn't unlike affluent enclaves at home, Bascombe thinks. They stop at the top, at Fred Smithert's, a sprawling hacienda of stucco and red tile roof and territorial view. There are olive trees. Ripening grapes hang heavily on vines. The BMW is in the circular driveway with other vehicles.

Heather Bascombe stares at a camera on a post and pushes the



call button. After several minutes of waiting for a response, she says, "Marshall, a sheet of paper, please."

Bascombe tears a page out of his spiral notebook. Heather lipsticks WE KNOW YOU ARE HERE, FRED and holds it up.

"The next best thing to saliva in the eyeball," she says.

That evening, as the Bascombes do some preliminary packing, they're wondering aloud why not Madrid or Barcelona for Fred Smithert.

"Córdoba is a medium-sized city, the population of Wichita or Raleigh. It'd be easier to lose yourself in the bigger cities," Marshall says.

"How many American tourists have we seen here, though?" Heather says. "Not many."

"Excellent point. Córdoba has all necessary services and considerable charm. A thousand years ago it was one of the world's major cities, capital of Muslim Spain. The Moorish Mezquita survives in its splendor. The Jewish quarter, the museums, and restaurants. There are worse places to hide."

Heather answers a knock.

"Ms. Heather Johnstone?"

It's Smithert's lunchtime driver, a clean-cut man her age. Thin and earnest, he carries a soft briefcase.

"That was my prior married name. I'm Bascombe now."

"Well, hey, hi, I'm Chuck Avery. Special executive coordinator to Mr. Fred Smithert. Johnstone's on your driver's license when you rented the car."

"That was fast," Heather says. She'd expected her gesture to be ignored. "What did you do at the company, Chuck?"

"I was an administrative manager at home office."

From paper shuffler to valet, Heather resists saying. "So how is the great man?"

"May I come in for a minute?"

Heather stands aside. Avery enters and nods to Bascombe. Neither man moves to shake hands.

Avery unzips his case. "I accessed your records. Seventeen years at the company."

"Seventeen years, four months, eleven days."

"I'll cut to the chase, Heather," Avery says, withdrawing a document. "Mr. Smithert appreciates your loyalty and long service. He's authorized me to offer you an enhanced severance package."

Heather laughs. "Anything is enhanced compared to what we peons got."

Chuck Avery flushes. "Fred Smithert is a convenient target:

Nothing is ever said about the impediments raised by the old guard to his strategic business initiatives. To his visions."

"When was he there to explain? He took the money and ran."

"I frankly don't approve of what Mr. Smithert is doing here," Avery says, tossing the document on a nightstand. "Overreacting to harassment."

"Harassment?" Heather says, her voice rising.

Bascombe steps between them. "I presume these papers are satisfactory. We'll look them over."

"Marshall."

"My wife is understandably upset."

"Marshall."

"Obviously, there are no-contact and nondisclosure clauses. I can come back." Avery glances at his watch. "Shall we say in an hour?"

"Marshall, if I want us to play good cop, bad cop, I'll let you know."

"No, we shall not say in an hour."

Heather looks at her husband, startled by his tone.

"Well, then, when?" asks a perturbed Avery.

"Tomorrow. Shall we say lunch?"

"It's a straightforward and generous offer." Chuck Avery sighs. "I suppose I can be free for a short—"

"Not you. Mr. Fred Smithert."

"He's an extremely busy man."

"Not too busy to eat lunch and to share a pitcher of an exceptional sangria. I received a tip from our desk clerk that the Café La Gloria has the city's finest. It's a block from Plaza de la Tendillas, on Calle Claudio Marcelo. You can't miss it."

Chuck Avery says, "This is doubtful. Even if Mr. Smithert can be persuaded, he requires assurances that there won't be a scene."

"No scene," Bascombe says, then smiles. "And we're buying lunch and the sangria."

After Avery's gone, Heather says, "What on earth is going on? What about Sevilla?"

"Sevilla can wait. Think of this, dear. You can tear up the agreement in front of him."

"Marshall, is that all?"

"Did you see my thesaurus, dear?" Bascombe says, pawing through a bag. "I need a synonym for bittersweet."

La Gloria is a neighborhood bar. Bullfighting posters fill the walls. The brass rail is polished. Fans and schoolhouse lamps hang from a coved ceiling.

Fred Smithert and Chuck Avery come in. Avery whispers in Smithert's ear and perches at the bar. Smithert walks to the Bascombes. He's in khakis and a pullover, as if an ordinary retiree whiling away at cheap buffets and public golf courses.

Marshall and Heather are on one side of the table. Fred Smithert sits across from them and says, "You're a newspaper reporter of some sort. You wrote a book too. Your name rang a bell to Chuck. He got online."

"Hel-lo," Heather wants to say, but she can't make her mouth work. She's thoroughly displeased at herself for being intimidated by Fred Satan.

From a pitcher, Bascombe fills three glasses with sangria. "This should be a treat. I saw the proprietor add a splash of Cointreau. A very nice touch indeed. Yes, I am a syndicated beverage writer."

Bascombe lifts his glass in toast. Heather follows suit.

Fred Smithert lifts his glass and drinks. "I read the front page, business section, and sports. I'm not up to speed on your kind of writing."

"Hmm," Bascombe says. He flips open a pocket notebook and writes, *an example of going the extra mile, or rather, this being Europe, the extra kilometer. It's not that difficult and expensive, and the rewards—*

"Ninety-plus newspapers you're in. I'm impressed," Smithert probes.

Heather Bascombe puts the severance document on the table. Smithert finally acknowledges her. "I don't see your signature."

"Try the chorizo, Mr. Smithert. The almonds too," Bascombe says, sliding over the tapas on saucer-sized plates. "Spain's fabled appetizers. The nuts are sautéed in olive oil. You won't find these in a packet on an airplane, perhaps even on a corporate jet."

Fred Smithert raises eyebrows at the dig and does so, washing the food down with sangria as he studies the pair.

Heather Bascombe tears the severance agreement neatly in half.

Smithert laughs. "You've made a costly statement, young lady. Consider yourself a footnote on the list of know-nothing losers who've insulted me. Everybody's a Monday morning quarterback. Everybody sees the big picture when it's in reruns. Everybody is so anxious for a scapegoat, they overlook the economic downturn and negative market dynamics."

He gets up and says to Bascombe, "If you use your bully pulpit to skewer me in print, your libel insurance premiums better be paid up."

"And your life insurance premiums, sir, are they current?" Bascombe asks.

Smithert sits down. "What the hell does that mean?"

Bascombe shrugs. "I'm making rhetorical chitchat."

Smithert leans forward. "Sounds like a threat to me."

Bascombe sips his sangria. "The tip was correct. This is a winner, unquestionably among the top sangrias in Córdoba. It's the complexity. The sugars, the esters, the aromatics. The quality of the red wine base too, a Rioja or Ribera from northern Spain. This drink is so subtly complex that it could mask any number of chemicals."

"Chemicals?" Smithert says.

"Oh, for instance, deadly untraceable toxins."

"Don't attempt to bluff me, friend. I'm good at a lot of things, poker included. I've played Texas Hold 'Em in Vegas with the best."

"Numerous natural substances are poisonous until processed. Take that great tropical staple, cassava. Squeezing the cyanide from the root transforms it from poison to manna."

Heather is stunned. Marshall hadn't given her an inkling, but she plays along. "Almonds and cyanide. Isn't it almonds they smell in the detective shows when somebody dies of cyanide poisoning?"

"Nice try," Smithert says. "We're drinking from the same pitcher."

"But from different glasses, Mr. Smithert," Bascombe says. "Glasses that preceded you."

Smithert pushes his drink to the middle of the table.

Bascombe continues, "The initial symptoms may be tingling in the extremities. Of course, by then it's too late."

"You've abused my good disposition too long," Smithert says.

He hurries out, Chuck Avery in his slipstream. Heather tears the document halves into quarters.

In their room, Heather says, "You didn't, did you, Marshall? You wouldn't, would you?"

Bascombe sits heavily on the bed. "In a way, I'm indebted to Fred Smithert. If not for him, we wouldn't have met. However, he's remained within you, an infection, a malignant growth. I wanted to remove him, to free you from him. This meeting gave me the opportunity.

"And nature abhors a coincidence, doesn't it, dear? What are the odds of you randomly spotting this man seven time zones from home? Did your e-mail network of former colleagues inform you? The electronic jungle drums?"

"Somebody backpacking through Europe saw him last week in that restaurant. I suggested the plaza for us, lousy sangria or not, in the hope that he had a routine. I was dumbfounded that he did."

"To spit in his face. Figuratively."

Heather sits beside him. "Marshall, if you did poison him, you'll be caught."

"But I didn't, dear. Regardless of how impervious Smithert is to a bluff, I don't think he'll sleep well tonight. You spit in his face by refusing his bribe, and you're married to an unbalanced person who entertains homicidal fantasies. He's scared, dear. He's frightened to death. Anyone would be."

Heather holds him, knowing Marshall didn't poison Smithert, so relieved that she won't lose him.

They linger in the south of Spain. Bascombe writes features on sherry country and their vintages. He writes a spread on the tapa and its near-infinite variations. There may be cookbook potential, in which Heather will actively collaborate. They have a second honeymoon that is far more a honeymoon than the first.

They pass back through Córdoba. Tomorrow they'll catch the train to Madrid, then fly home. They make a return visit to Smithert's compound for a quick look. There is no BMW in the driveway, no other vehicles either. Clusters of rotting grapes droop from the vines. On the gate is a realtor's *se vende* sign.

"For sale," Heather translates.

"I wonder where he went," Marshall Bascombe says.

"Marsh, dear," Heather says, taking his hand. "Let it go, okay?"

## Solution to the December "Dying Words"

### WORD LIST

A. Tiptoe  
B. Neediest  
C. Olfactory  
D. Lithe  
E. Ayn Rand  
F. Nuthatch  
G. Aerate  
H. Berries

I. Off the cuff  
J. Underway  
K. Threshes  
L. Minister  
M. Affluent  
N. Reedy  
O. Gypsy moth  
P. Aquamarine  
Q. Resign

R. Entrees  
S. Territory  
T. Murphy's Law  
U. Industry  
V. Liniment  
W. Library  
X. Auntie Mame  
Y. Rhymes

### QUOTATION

Author—T(om) NOLAN

Work—ABOUT MARGARET MILLAR (from *The Couple Next Door*, published by Crippen & Landru—Copyright © 2004)

"Not many mystery readers in the twenty-first century, it seems, are familiar with the byline of Margaret Millar . . . but during her nearly fifty-year career, this unique author . . . helped shape the nature of modern mystery and suspense fiction."

# BLOOD MONEY

DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

**F**ifty thousand dollars was a lot of money to turn down.

Colonel Benét found the bounty hunter overscrupulous.

"Simple justice," the colonel said. "An eye for an eye."

"You don't appear to be looking for justice," Placido Geist told him. "You're soliciting murder for hire."

"I didn't realize your principles were so inelastic."

"My principles are elastic enough, but my neck isn't," the bounty hunter said. "What you're asking me to do would get me a brief drop on a short rope."

"I want recompense."

"You want retribution."

"Call it what you will," the colonel said stiffly.

"I call it nothing I want a part of."

"Are you all that squeamish? Your reputation would suggest otherwise."

"My reputation isn't something I'm required to inhabit with the understanding that it invites insult," Placido Geist said.

"I doubted you'd accept the commission," Lockjaw Lamar told him.

"And then some," the bounty hunter snorted.

The judge smiled. "You don't sound very taken with Colonel Benét."

"I understand he's suffered a bitter loss, but the solution is out of line with his injury."

"His only son dead and any hope for a grandchild lost?"

"You're acting Devil's Advocate."

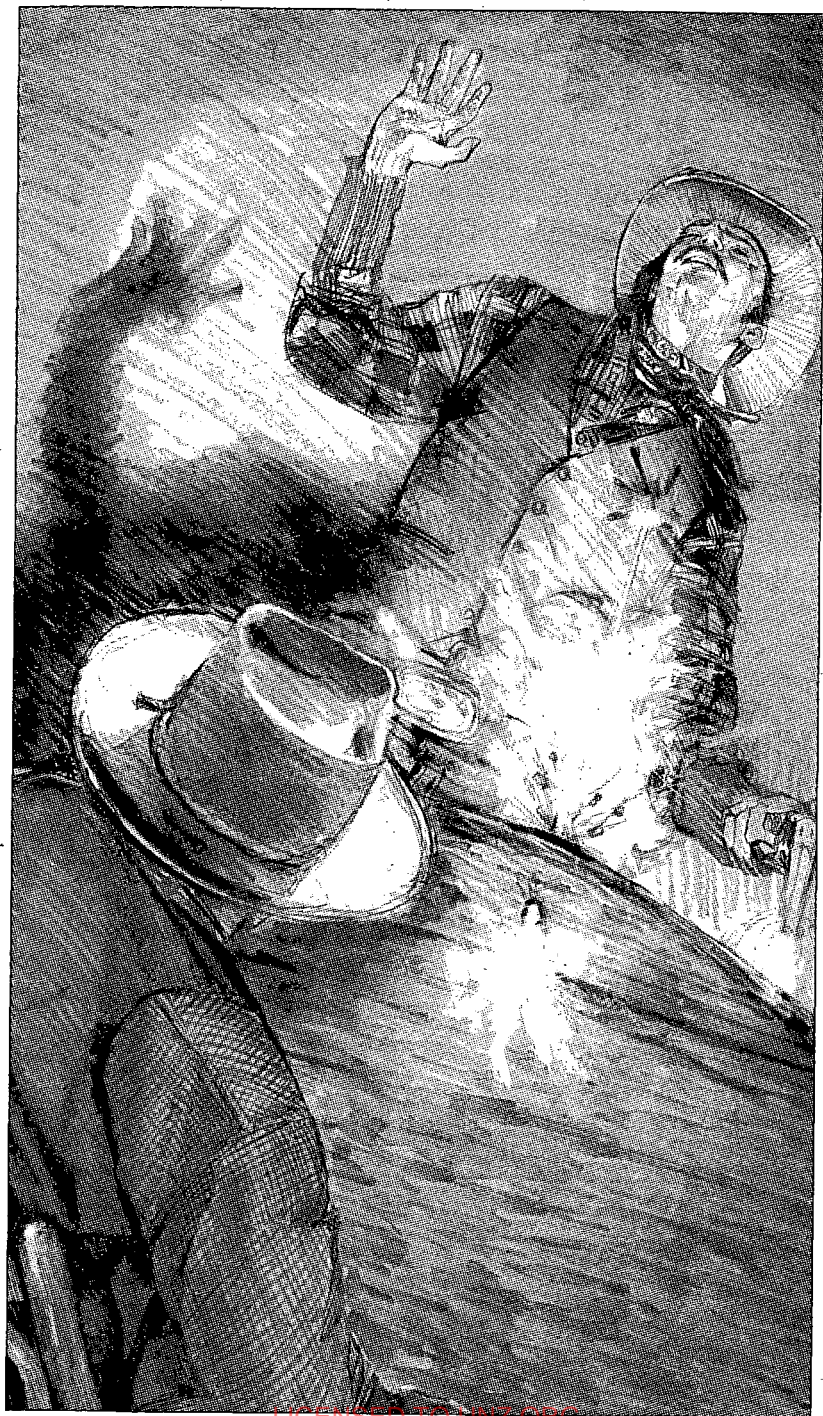
"A role that singles me out, often enough."

The bounty hunter smiled as well. The two men had met during a charged political inquiry that resulted in damage to a good many reputations and elevated others less deserving.

"The argument, if I might label it so," the judge said, "is that Colonel Benét requires a blood price be paid."

"He's not entitled to it."





"The man got your back up, I see."

"It's one thing to contemplate revenge," Placido Geist said to the judge. "I know I have."

The judge had been a party to it too, and chose to let the bounty hunter's remark pass.

"It's another thing entirely to compass a homicide."

"Conspiracy to commit a killing is felony murder. Unless you could contrive to make it appear otherwise, an assassination cloaked as, say, self-defense."

"Well, that's what he thought he was paying for. Which, on balance, is why I found him offensive," the bounty hunter said.

"That he'd hire it done."

"And seek to avoid penalty. It's a coward's choice."

"You think he should gun the man himself and face whatever consequences afterwards?"

"It would be a damn sight more honest, and honorable."

"Maybe honorable doesn't enter into it," the judge said.

"But he wants his name attached to the business, that's the point. Not whispered about. Spoken of. An open secret."

"Not probative. A rumor doesn't invite indictment."

"No, but it intimidates. Colonel Benét wants his fiat, his whim, made corporal."

"To demonstrate his reach."

"I'd suggest it was a demonstration of his own vanity."

"To have this man—what's his name, Emory?—put down like a dog that kills chickens, simply because he can."

They agreed, then, on the moral point. It was the shoal water of particular incident they'd run aground in. And it was to be admitted that Colonel Benét had in fact suffered an irredeemable injury. It was also pretty much agreed that what had happened was simple bad luck: Nathan Benét, the colonel's son and heir, the repository of his dynastic ambitions, had been the unhappy victim of another man's carelessness, or stupidity, but the inquest ruled it accidental death, and no charge of manslaughter was filed. Set at liberty, the man Colonel Benét held responsible promptly departed the immediate environs, sensibly assuming Texas law could be bought, and was reported to be presently at large in the Bootheel of New Mexico.

The facts were these. A woman named Magdalena Benavidez maintained a house of ill repute in Del Valle, just south of the capital. It was much frequented by state legislators, and she enjoyed the protection of both the Austin city police and Travis County sheriff's deputies. On the afternoon in question, the man later identified as Kick Emory was disporting himself in one of the

upper front rooms. Kick was an itinerant, not exactly a bum, but someone who put his hand to what he found, whether it were carpentry or cowpunching, and it happened he found himself flush with money that week in Austin. He spent most of the week at Magdalena's cathouse, favoring one girl over the others, a red-headed Anglo who called herself Philadelphia Sinclair and claimed to be from back East. In truth, her name was Jemmie

**I'll take small credit for shooting  
a man with a napkin in his lap.**

Dart, she'd been a whore for all her grown life, and she'd never been east of Kansas.

Why, might we ask, did Nathan Benét also happen to be frequenting a whorehouse on the afternoon in dispute? It was a question his father seemed unlikely or unwilling to address. Nathan was recently married; his wife was in fact now pregnant with their first child; he had nothing to answer for and had everything to look forward to. Let's say simply that a man of his background, with his responsibilities—and his father's expectations—found it easier, or somehow simpler, to get his pipe smoked without consequences. It was certainly common enough, and Magdalena's was exactly the place you'd go, discreet if openly talked of (in male company), flagrant behavior kept private, transactions to be negotiated, anything to be had for a price.

This, then, was the concatenation of circumstance.

Kick Emory caromed off the roof of the veranda in a shower of glass, thrown out the window of Jemmie Dart's room by one of Magdalena's bouncers. Violence offered the whore, perhaps, or merely underpayment, but later inquiries made it unclear. He then slid off the roof of the veranda and fell on Nathan Benét.

Kick was unhurt, if bruised and embarrassed. Nathan's neck was broken. The coroner's jury returned a verdict of death by misadventure; a man in his underclothes wasn't an instrument of murder. The problem was compounded by both the personal and the political: The colonel's boy couldn't be dead of stupidity.

There was more than enough blame to go around, and further accident, or unhappiness. The colonel's daughter-in-law lost her child, and the colonel was denied the fruit of his son's seed. Magdalena Benavidez and her establishment were too well protected for the colonel to attack in person, but the whore Jemmie Dart disappeared, perhaps returning to the family she'd sometimes spoken of. More likely she was sold into the cribs of El Paso, and from there across the river. The bouncer was found dead in an irrigation ditch, drowned in two inches of water and alleged to be drunk at the time.

Such a series of mischance didn't go unnoticed.

"He's stalking them," Placido Geist said.

"Anybody involved with his son's death, culpable or no."

"They're all culpable, in his view."

"I take your point," Lamar said. He could see the bounty hunter was wrestling with himself, but the judge wasn't someone who'd intrude on another man's internal struggle. He understood well enough how your gut could tighten with anger or guilt.

"Damn the man," Placido Geist said. He meant Benét.

Not that Kick Emory was any prize himself. He'd been in and out of scrapes for all his adult life, short though it was to date, and had done time in Kansas for manslaughter. There was, therefore, some logic in the colonel's demand that Kick be held accountable, as the world at large might best be rid of him and his skills at courting trouble.

But this was an abstraction and an excuse, Placido Geist argued, not the situation as it obtained on the ground. If there were a greater social good in Kick Emory's demise, Colonel Benét was using it to mask a personal vendetta.

"He wouldn't be the first," Lamar said.

"No, nor will he be the last, but a better man would own up to the fact that his motives weren't pure."

"Absolute moral certainty is always suspect," Lamar agreed.

"What happened last month over in Dime Box?"

"Oh, hell," the bounty hunter said, looking awkward. "That was a sorry piece of work, I'd be the first to admit."

"And now the shoe's on the other foot."

"When did I hire you to be my conscience?"

Lamar looked at him over the rims of his spectacles. It was a gaze he'd practiced when he was still active on the bench, and it signified that the judge wasn't to be trifled with.

The incident he was referring to did Placido Geist little credit. He'd killed a man based on circumstantial evidence—no more than his instinct and experience. That he'd been right to do so, his instinct and experience being more than most men's, cut little ice with the young man's father, Farragut Hagerty, a rancher of no small influence in East Texas\*. Placido Geist felt scant remorse, but the matter was proving troublesome.

"I hear old man Hagerty's put up bounty money for you," the judge said.

"I hear the same," Placido Geist admitted.

"You kill a man's son, and he puts a price on your head. Kick Emory kills a man's son, and that man puts a price on his."

\* See *"The Cottonwoods," AHMM, October 2006.*



"You don't appreciate the distinction," Placido Geist replied tartly. "Kick Emory fell off a whorehouse roof. Derek Hagerty threw down on me and I defended myself."

This was shading the truth, some. He'd in fact goaded the Hagerty kid into gunplay. He knew Derek Hagerty to be complicit in a lynching, but having no proof, served up his own equity.

"If you don't mind my saying so," the judge retorted, "any fair-minded observer would remark the similarities. Two men's sons are dead. Both of those men have money and political connections. Both of those men seek an accounting. Both of those men have a quarry in their sights." The judge took a deep breath, stifling his impatience with an old friend. "I'm not comparing you with Kick Emory," he said. "I'm simply suggesting that you have a motive as transparent as Colonel Benét's."

"Which is?"

"You don't want to see Emory's death bought and paid for."

"Somebody has to catch him first."

"But it won't be you, by your own choice."

"Benét will hire another man."

"He won't hire a better."

"That remains to be seen," Placido Geist said. "Any number of men will hunt their own kind if the price is right."

The judge had a sudden presentiment. He realized he should have seen it from the start. "You intend to find Emory first."

"I intend to beat Colonel Benét to his prize, yes."

The judge shook his head. "If this weren't fast becoming a farce, it would soon be tragedy," he said.

"No," Placido Geist told him. "A tragedy, defined, is the drama of a man brought low by a flaw in his own character. This may be an unhappy or an unfortunate circumstance, an accident waiting to happen, perhaps, but by no sensible measure can it be misnamed a tragedy."

The judge didn't answer. Tragedy, he also well knew, turns on fated moments. If so, the question then was whose.

In 1853, the Gadsden Purchase relocated the border of the United States, moving it some sixty miles south of the Gila River to its present-day boundary with Chihuahua and Sonora. This negotiation might be characterized as a conciliatory gesture to Mexico, which had lost all of California and what was now the American Southwest five years before that, in a war of adventure still bitterly resented. For a price of ten million dollars, about 45,000 square miles changed hands; most of it wound up in what was now Arizona, the tag-end left over for New Mexico. The

shape of this arbitrary line on a map, falling just below the Thirty-Second Parallel, was geometric: It followed none of the natural contours of the land, and in New Mexico it was known as the Bootheel. West of El Paso, the main Southern Pacific route cut up toward Deming. The rail line along the border was a feeder road for livestock and local freight, stop-and-go, twice weekly.

Placido Geist chose to go saddleback on a hired mount and tack. The buckskin gelding was a damn' decent horse, he discovered, after making fifty miles the first day, which was asking a little much from both man and animal. They got to Columbus just as the light was failing.

Columbus, New Mexico, was the site of a cross-border raid by Pancho Villa's guerrilla troops in 1916, two years previous. Placido Geist dismounted in front of the shuttered railway station. The depot clock had stopped a bullet that March morning of Villa's attack. Its inner workings were jammed fast, the hands stuck at 4:20 A.M.

The bounty hunter went to find a place to stay, for himself a bath, if possible, and for the horse, grain and a rubdown.

He pushed on the next day.

The country was hard, unwatered, a desert landscape. Towns were few. He was making for Antelope Wells, a border crossing. Word had it that Kick Emory was holed up there. But if word had it, Placido Geist wouldn't be the only one who'd heard.

They made another forty miles. The buckskin was game enough. The bounty hunter knew he wasn't doing the horse any favors, though. Placido Geist wouldn't last much longer than a dead horse. He camped on the trail, resting the gelding that night and walking him the best part of the following day before turning due south to cross the Hatchets. Antelope Wells was situated about halfway between the Alamo Hueco and the Continental Divide. It was another two days' ride to the border. He had to conserve the horse's energies, as well as his own, but he imagined time was already against him.

The town numbered no more than four hundred residents, although on market days it probably drew some itinerant custom. The buildings were by and large of one story, mud-plastered adobe or sod, there being little in the way of indigenous timber for framing lumber or planking. Although it was styled a Port of Entry on the ordnance maps, there was no sister settlement across the border, probably because there was no river between and no viable water source. Antelope Wells was orphaned, an accident not of geography but of the Gadsden



Treaty. It had no good reason for being there.

There was, however, a telegraph office, the twentieth century gaining ground, and an Army garrison, manned at less than company strength, perhaps forty officers and men, all told, detailed to patrol a trackless stretch of border that invited casual depredations, given the unruly state of the insurgency in Mexico. The largest establishment in Antelope Wells called itself the Longhorn, a saloon with gaming tables, the few whores drawing most of their idle custom from the cavalry post.

It was the only place to rent a room. It was also where Placido Geist expected to find the man Emory, although why Emory would choose this flyblown outpost was a puzzle. The place to lose yourself was somewhere well trafficked, busy with nameless transients, both opportunists and their prey, not some town on the edge of nowhere where you couldn't go unnoticed. But perhaps Emory had confused isolation with secrecy, an easy mistake.

The bounty hunter was to realize his own mistake early that evening.

**H**e took note of the man first thing, of course. There was an easy physical confidence, the mark of a practiced gunhawk. Not a swagger, more of a completeness, absolutely aware of the immediate environment. He'd come in through the back, where the whores had their cribs, but he didn't have the look of a man dulled by recent and hurried sex. He had more the sleepy aspect of a tiger pretending to ignore a staked goat.

Placido Geist was seated at one of the vacant blackjack tables. There had been no other place to sit. He'd waved away both of the girls who'd offered him company, had eaten a not unacceptable steak, gristly but flavorful, if overcooked, and he was sipping a weak coffee with a whiskey chaser.

The man who'd come in through the back walked over to the table. He was a compact sort, of medium height, the kind of man likely to be very quick, Placido Geist calculated.

"Straw's my name. I believe I know yours."

Placido Geist nodded. They'd never met, but Simon Straw had killed sixteen men, to the bounty hunter's knowledge, in the Texas Panhandle and in Oklahoma. He was as good as they came. Both of them were out of their usual territory, but they were on all too familiar territory with each other.

"I believe we have a bone to pick," Straw said.

Placido Geist had himself unhurriedly surveyed the near environs, casting about for a second shooter, but had seen none. This

appeared to be a straightforward transaction, man to man. "I believe we may have an argument," he conceded. "And one I'd prefer to avoid. You're here for Kick Emory, if I don't miss my guess. I've come to prevent your killing him."

Simon Straw smiled. It was a disarming smile, almost apologetic. It wasn't meant to give insult. "I'm not here for that ranny," he said. "I'm here for you, Espectro." His stance was relaxed, practically nerveless, none of his muscles tensed.

His hands were at his sides, the elbows slightly bent, like a man ready to pick up a glass. His gun was worn high on the hip, a .44 Remington single-action.

"Kick Emory is worth fifty thousand dollars to Nathan Benét's father," Placido Geist said. "I can't be worth the time and energy."

"You'd be worth it to me," Straw said.

He should have seen it before, he now saw. "How much money has Farragut Hagerty put up for me?" he asked.

Simon Straw shrugged. "Twenty-five thousand," he said.

"The price for the cowboy's twice that."

"Kick Emory's holed up on the Hagerty place back in Texas," Straw said. "He's nowhere near New Mexico."

"Old man Hagerty's giving sanctuary to Emory from Colonel Benét," Placido Geist said, snapping to it at the last, if a little late. "And this entire fool's errand has been meant only to draw me out."

"That's about the size of it," Straw said.

To die in some backwater where there was no law to stop it. It wasn't Kick Emory who'd picked this place.

"Let's step out into the street," Straw said.

"Why bother?" Placido Geist asked him.

"I'll take small credit for shooting a man with a napkin in his lap."

"You want a fair fight," Placido Geist said. "You want we should stand up to each other. You want it known you could take me. And your reward is my celebrity, not Hagerty's money."

"I don't care about the money, old man. I want it said I went up against you, and we took the ten paces, and shot it out. God's truth, I'd admire your scalp on my belt."

"It's a dubious eminence, Straw," Placido Geist said.

"Fine words butter no parsnips."

"Make your play," Placido Geist told him.

He was indeed very fast, and almost fast enough. His left hand moved across his body as he drew the gun with his right, so the heel of his left hand cocked the hammer.

Placido Geist shot him through the table with the nine-inch Smith he'd been holding under his napkin, the bullet splintering

up through the felt, taking Straw in the chest. He went down in a burst of tissue and bone.

Straw's own bullet had nicked the bounty hunter's earlobe. Placido Geist stepped out from behind the table and put his foot on Straw's wrist.

"Damn," Straw said, looking up, his breath a whisper in his shattered lungs. "You've done for me."

"They couldn't have sent a better," Placido Geist said.

Air bubbled on Straw's lips. "I found my better," he said. He coughed, wetly, and choked to death on his own blood.

Placido Geist touched the napkin to his ear.

Fine words butter no parsnips. The bounty hunter regretted having to kill a literate man.

Other than the Army, there was no law in Antelope Wells, and he chose not to wait for things to sort themselves out. He rode the gelding north to Deming, three full days, where he could catch a through train, and they traveled to Texas by rail, the buckskin riding in the freight wagons, his job done. Placido Geist had left a job half done, but now he had to see it through to the finish.

He was going to settle with the Hagertys. The fated moment awaited him, and he would no longer avoid it.

Emile Duquesne wasn't overly glad to see him again. The sheriff of Dime Box knew trouble when it came courting.

"The last time you passed through, there were coffins made. Is this getting to be a habit?"

"Hagerty sent a man to kill me."

"He'll send others."

"Not if there's no one left alive to pay my bounty."

Duquesne studied the old manhunter. His hands rested on his desk, and he was careful to leave them there. "That sounds much like an offer of violence to Farragut Hagerty's person," he remarked. "I've no grounds to arrest you, as yet. And there's no doubt in my mind that should I attempt such an arrest, you'd spill my brains before my gun cleared leather."

"I'd be unhappy to see it come to that," Placido Geist said.

"So would I, and I'd be on the unhappy end of it."

"What are the odds I can parley with Hagerty?"

"Slim to none," the sheriff said. "Your best chance of a negotiation would be to kill him, and then his oldest son Peter, and then you'd have no choice but to kill me as well."

"You wouldn't let it rest there."

"Couldn't," Duquesne told him.

"Because you're in Hagerty's pocket."

"What difference does that make if he's dead? Besides, he might have bought the gun, but he can't buy the badge. I signed on for an honest day's work, half a lifetime ago."

"Time you earned your pay," Placido Geist said.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars, if I shoot you in the back," the sheriff said.

"I won't leave you to cover my back, then."

"Ah, hell," Duquesne said, pushing to his feet. "Somebody has to."

"No need for it to be you," the bounty hunter said.

"No need," Duquesne agreed. "Other than mine."

They rode out to the Hagerty spread together. Duquesne sat a roan. Placido Geist was riding his claybank mare. "That's an ugly damn hammer-headed horse," Duquesne remarked. Placido Geist said nothing. Duquesne wasn't the first to comment on the mare's appearance.

"Must be like having an ugly wife," Duquesne said. "Nobody wants to steal her."

He was making conversation to cover his anxiety, the bounty hunter understood.

"It's said you've killed over forty men," the sheriff said.

"Near enough," Placido Geist said.

"You remember them all?" Duquesne asked.

"Every one," the bounty hunter said.

"Not something you forget, I'd imagine. Like the women you chose to sleep with."

"Some of those women have slipped my mind."

Duquesne sniffed. "Not mine," he said.

"Fifty-six," Placido Geist said.

Duquesne knew it wasn't women the old man was keeping score of, but the number of graves the bounty hunter had filled.

"I don't take pride in it," Placido Geist told him.

"But you're alive."

Placido Geist nodded to himself. "There's that," he said.

Duquesne fell silent. The two men rode the rest of the way without talking.

They walked their horses in through the corrals and drew up in front of the main house. Neither of them dismounted. A few Hagerty hands were on the porch. A few more gathered, curious as to what might be about to happen. Placido Geist and Duquesne sat their horses, waiting for it as well.

"What's your object?" the sheriff asked him.

"Not to get killed, or you either," the bounty hunter said. "Nor to kill any innocents."

Duquesne had a twelve-gauge scattergun resting across the pommel of his saddle, a holstered .45 on his hip. "We'll see how that works out," he said. "Let's hope they're respectful of the office of the law."

A tall man, weathered but only in his late twenties or early thirties, stepped out onto the porch and looked at the two men on horseback. There was nothing friendly in his gaze. His look was in fact more hostile toward the sheriff than toward the bounty hunter. His name was Peter Hagerty.

"You know me," Placido Geist said. "I killed your brother. And you're also well aware he invited it."

The tall man moved forward out of the shadow of the porch overhang and into the sunlight at the top of steps. "He was a boy," he said, his words rusty. "He chased whores, he was unlucky at cards, he couldn't break a horse, he didn't have the stomach to brand a calf. I've looked out for him since he was three years old. He was a featherweight. I knew that, but I cared about that kid. And when you shot him down in the streets of Dime Box, you were too quick for me then to stop it."

"I'm too quick for you now, son," Placido Geist said.

"You're a murderer," Peter Hagerty said. "And you," he said to Duquesne, "you stood by and let it happen, and you stand by now."

"Not quite the same," the sheriff said. "I stood by then so as not to see you dead alongside your brother. I'm here now to back this man up. There's enough fault to go around."

Peter glanced away. "It doesn't matter," he said.

"Yes, it does," Duquesne said. "Your father put a price on this man's head."

"This man answers for what he did," Peter Hagerty said.

"I'd rather answer for what I haven't done," Placido Geist said mildly, and both Peter Hagerty and the sheriff looked at him in surprise. "For my failure of nerve, for not speaking up, for lacking courage, for never being bold enough with women."

Hagerty and Duquesne stared at him.

"We deserve to be told the truth, all of us," Placido Geist said. "Me included." He dismounted, letting the reins trail.

He was a short, stocky half-breed. Peter Hagerty, standing tall on the porch, overtopped him by a good three feet.

"Your brother was a boy, yes," Placido Geist went on. "He was a rotten boy, a spoiled boy, and sooner or later he would have gotten what was coming to him. I'm sorry it had to be me, but it

would have been somebody. You're welcome to try and kill me, if that gives recompense."

The bounty hunter took off his sombrero and scaled it onto the ground. "I've hunted men, but I won't be hunted," he said to Peter Hagerty. "Your father offered any and all comers a bounty of twenty-five thousand dollars to whoever killed me. Is he ready and able to do it himself?"

Peter turned abruptly and went into the house.

Duquesne, sitting his saddle, blew out his breath. "You're trying a man's patience," he remarked to the bounty hunter.

The old man nodded. "This family is trying mine," he said. "They want a reckoning. I want a night's rest."

"At what cost?" Duquesne asked him.

"Whatever the market will bear," Placido Geist said.

Duquesne wasn't about to cross him. He'd known men who could be placated, or persuaded. The bounty hunter was obdurate as stone.

They brought Farragut Hagerty out onto the porch, carrying him in a bentwood rocker, his son Peter taking half his father's weight, and a Chinaman in a cook's apron taking the other half. They were like pallbearers. Old man Hagerty had an Indian blanket thrown around his shoulders, the folds bunched in his lap, his hands beneath the blanket. Placido Geist thought about the gun he'd had under his napkin when he shot Simon Straw.

But there was no life in Hagerty's limbs. He had barely the strength to sit upright. One side of his face was knotted and frozen, the skin tight enough to burst, the other side lazy and drooping. His mouth was crooked, slack with drool. Placido Geist knew him for the victim of stroke. Hagerty's eyes were still alive, though, filled with fury and resentment, the look of a man insulted, an insult he was helpless to revenge. His very flesh had failed him, and his anger at this final indignity burned hot enough to make his waxy skin glow from within.

He stared at Placido Geist. "This man should hang," he said. His voice was papery. The bounty hunter was surprised he still had the power of speech. "Hang," he rasped.

Peter Hagerty looked up at Duquesne, still on horseback. "We've got rope," he said. "And enough men to see justice done. Are you thinking to stop it?"

"Let's talk about hanging," the sheriff said. "Your baby brother persuaded a couple of your cowhands to lynch a kid who'd crossed him over a whore."

"You heard that from the whore," Peter said.

"I heard that from the whore," Placido Geist corrected him. "You



know it to be true. So does every man standing here."

"Every man standing here works for my father," Peter said.

"You know damn well I'll take the gun over the rope," the bounty hunter said. "And this bunch can kill me, of that I have no doubt, if it comes to that, but I'll drop a good five of them first, and you'll be the first one to fall."

"Hang him," the old man growled. Spit was running down his chin. He vibrated with palsy.

"You're never going to be the man your father was, Peter," Placido Geist said. "Maybe you can be a better one. He requires an injury to be redeemed, but this isn't your grief. I shot your brother dead. He was a boy who needed killing."

"You can't ask this of me," Peter Hagerty said.

"I can ask," the bounty hunter said. "You live with your choices. You can keep faith with a dead man, or a dying one, or you can choose to accept different results."

"He was my brother, damn you."

"He was a ne'er-do-well. You have it in you to be the man your father expects. You have it in you to be the man you might expect of yourself. You're assuming too great a burden."

"You're talking to stay alive."

"I'm talking to keep you alive, boy," Placido Geist told him. "I'd regret having to kill you, but regret won't get in my way if you force my hand."

"Hang him," old man Hagerty whispered furiously. The violence of his inner thoughts seemed the only thing sustaining him, his life suspended on a thread, like the thread of saliva suspended from the corner of his mouth, silvery as a cobweb and nearly as insubstantial.

"What's it going to be?" Placido Geist asked Peter Hagerty.

"Your father's anger will haunt you, either way you choose."

"Aw, piss on it," Peter muttered, defeated.

In the charged silence, the sound of the lever gun being cocked was as crisp as a coin dropping on a marble bar. None of the men turned, careful not to break their brittle truce.

"These people sheltered me," the kid holding the Winchester '94 said. "I owe them for that kindness."

Duquesne glanced over his shoulder, not shifting his weight or altering his posture. "And who might you be?" he asked.

"He'd be Kick Emory," Placido Geist said.

"That would be me," Emory acknowledged.

"This is the man a certain Colonel Benét holds responsible for the death of his son Nathan," the bounty hunter explained to Duquesne. "The colonel put money on his head."

"Not that you'll ever collect," Emory said.

"Never meant to," Placido Geist said. "I found the colonel distasteful. I turned his money down."

"Wasn't it enough?"

"I've no interest in you," Placido Geist said. "Far as I'm concerned, you're no longer worth saving."

"You've got too much mouth," Emory said, moving a little to the right for a clean shot at the bounty hunter.

Duquesne stood in the stirrups and made a quick half turn with his upper body, bringing the twelve-gauge to bear, and blew Kick Emory's belly through his backbone.

"Will they lift the reward?"

"That's up to Peter Hagerty," Placido Geist shrugged, tightening the saddle cinches. "I don't see him following in his father's footsteps. You thought he wouldn't bargain, but we came to an accommodation."

"He might not forgive you for shaming him," Duquesne said.

"Forgiveness is for God," Placido Geist said. "The rest of us muddle along the best we can."

Duquesne smiled. "What's the story with Emory, the kid who had it in mind to shoot you?"

"His pelt's worth fifty thousand dollars, you take it in to Austin and deliver the goods to Randolph Benét."

Duquesne was shocked at the amount.

"I chose not to be the instrument of the colonel's revenge, but I've no objection to your collecting on the debt."

"Blood money."

"And paid for in kind," Placido Geist said. He mounted the claybank mare. "I'm obliged to you for it."

He rode out.

Duquesne watched him go. Of course the colonel's money was tainted. The only thing left untainted was self-respect.

There were always fated moments, though, he reflected. Perhaps his had come the first time the bounty hunter rode into town, bringing trouble the way a storm front presages rain. The sheriff didn't fault Placido Geist.

It's said that character is destiny. And how not? Duquesne asked himself. A man's character was all he had to show. You played the cards you were dealt. Some men lived up to their own expectations and some didn't. Some men lived lives without expectation and had no credit to redeem when they were called to the final account. What did it matter? You tried to become the man you imagined yourself to be, knowing that every man dies disappointed in himself.

But the dead have no memory. Only the living remember. At the end of the day, they alone survive to bear witness.

"So, a happy outcome," the judge said.

"I'm not convinced there are happy outcomes," Placido Geist said.

"Didn't we have this conversation once before?" Lamar asked him. "The perfect proving to be the enemy of the good?"

"Not precisely my point," the bounty hunter said. "I meant the scales aren't balanced."

"You don't have a murder warrant hanging over your head, or a bounty on your remains."

"I find it less than complete."

"We've had this same conversation too," Lamar said. "When is a thing finished? It's done when you decide it's done."

"I'd imagine it to be done," Placido Geist said.

"What's your argument with it, then?" the judge asked him.

"Lack of absolution."

"Whose? Kick Emory dead, albeit unfortunately. Thus, the colonel mollified." Lamar held up his hand. "The reverse of your intention, I understand. Still. This ill-found business with the Hagertys resolved, or at least held in abeyance. Where are you looking for indulgence? I'm not the pope in Rome."

"I have myself to answer to."

"Answer to yourself, then," Lamar said to him, "but do it on your own time." He lifted the decanter of Tennessee whiskey onto the table and set down two glasses. "I refuse to listen to a man sober, if he's going to wax lugubrious."

"Lugubrious?" Placido Geist took umbrage. "I'm asking you to parse a moral issue," he said.

"Horse snot. You're turning sentimental."

The last thing he ever thought he'd be accused of. "You're turning downright Biblical in your dotage," he said.

"I sat the bench thirty damn years, and I was Moses."

"Moses, my teeth."

They glared at each other, and then the judge suddenly burst out laughing. "Here we are, bickering like an old married couple," he said. "Is that dignified?"

"No, but comforting," the bounty hunter said.

Lamar put out the chess pieces. "When is justice honestly served?" he asked, rhetorically. "The younger of Hagerty's sons died at your hand because you knew he'd escape the noose."

"That was bad luck all around."

"It was necessary," the judge insisted.

"I'm not offering an apology."

"But you doubt yourself."

"I doubt the wisdom that's passed down, like the laws of the Hebrews," Placido Geist said. "We're drawn to absolutes and condemned to folly."

"Each of us makes choices. It's only given to fools to make the easy ones, because they choose the simpler course."

"The lesser of two evils."

"Evil isn't a matter of degree," the judge said.

"Derek Hagerty wasn't evil and neither was Kick Emory," the bounty hunter answered. "Foolish or willful or just plain damn dumb stupid, but wickedness found them by accident."

"And so did you," Lamar said. "Was that accident or their own doom? The turning of the wheel, appointed and implacable."

"Pour the whiskey," Placido Geist said. "This conversation is making me dry."

Lamar tipped the shot glasses full. "No man goes dry in my house," he said.

## THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

U ETZ'G FGTZK GA GSUZW THAJG SUY NTUGUZR  
UZ GSI DAAY TZK WZANUZR SI'F RAUZR GA RIG  
UG. UG'F GAA KTYZIK TNLJX.

—IDZIFG SIYUZRNTP

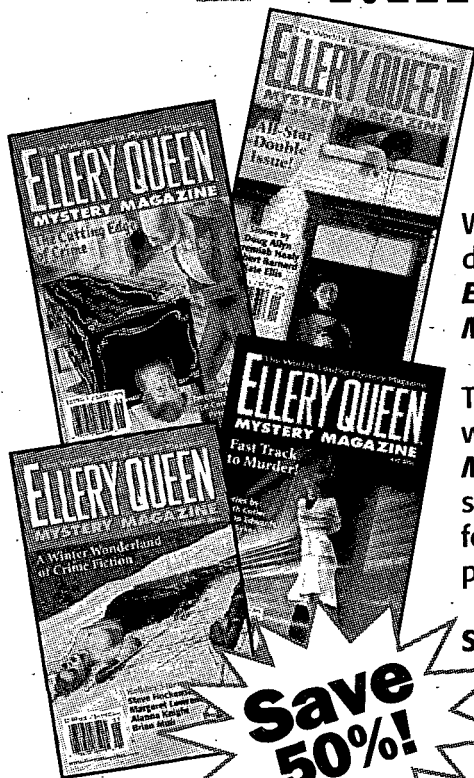
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ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

*Solution on page 133*

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# NO PICNIC

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MITCH ALDERMAN

A true, frog-drowning, Central Florida thunderstorm was beating at the windows at Bubba Simms Investigations. Lightning strobed the walls while the continuous rain formed waves on the glass. Bubba sat with his feet on the desk, hands behind his head, enjoying the spectacle. The pleasure felt richer because he wasn't standing outside directing traffic around a wreck, as he had done so often for twenty years. Thunderstorms were better to watch like this than through the windshield wipers of a Polk County Sheriff's Department patrol car.

A smash of thunder sounded a split second after the flash, and the lights flickered. Bubba had done his cardio on the treadmill for forty-five minutes at Big Al's Iron Works to start the day. He'd posted a bill to Arnie at State Wide Insurance. He'd feasted on a fine lunch at the Holiday Inn buffet. And now there was free entertainment. If only he were sleepy, he could take a nap in his recliner over in the corner of the office. He was glad Elvis was inside; a muddy blue-tick hound made for memorable greetings.

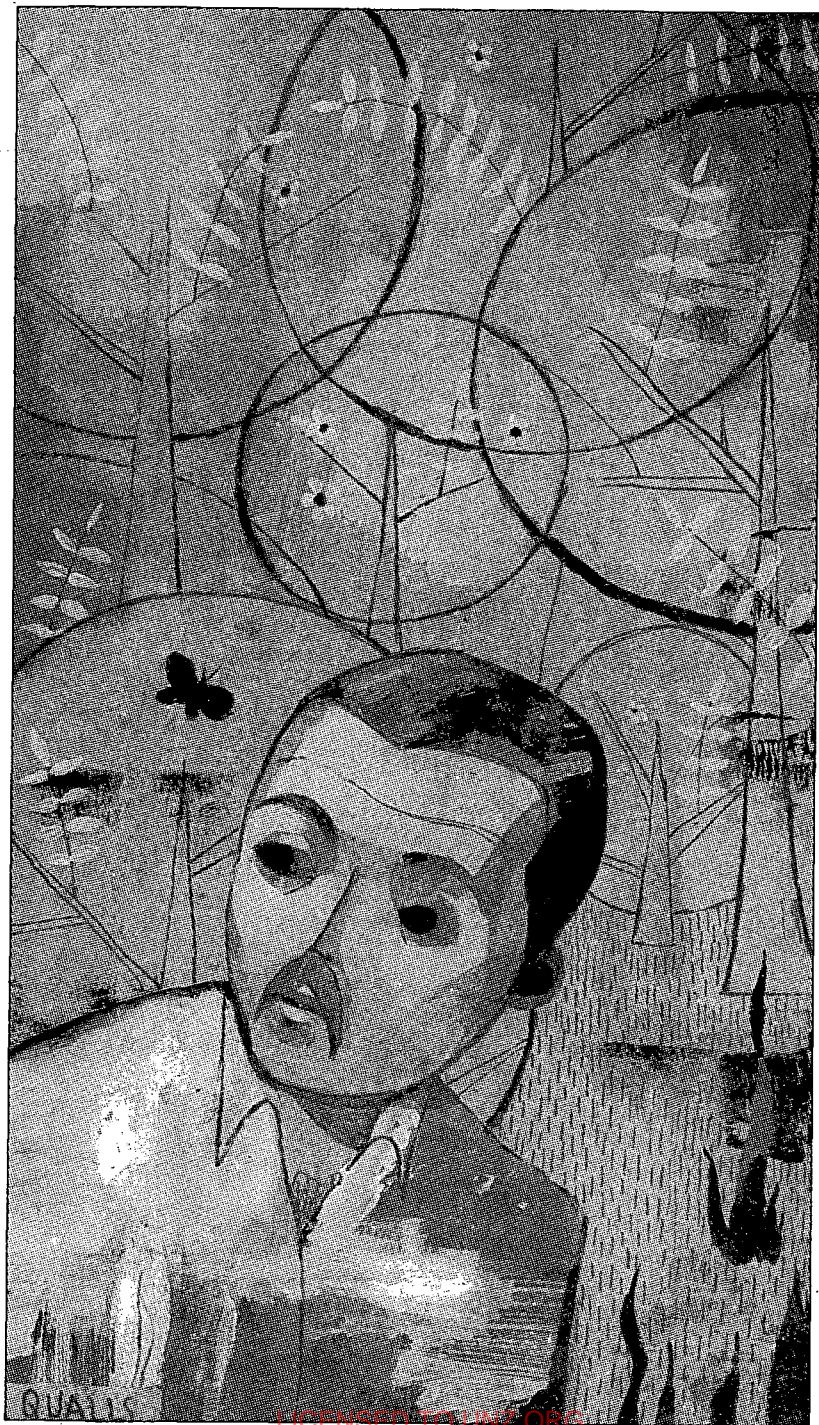
Then he heard the alley door bang, the metal booming shut from the wind. Loud steps climbed the staircase and proceeded down the hallway through the stacks of abandoned furniture that the landlord kept stored on the second floor. Someone was coming to Simms Investigations. And in this storm, they must be serious.

Bubba decided to make coffee. Whoever it was would be wet, and the AC was set low in his office. He was running water into the pot when the door opened. A man, wearing a black rain slicker, ducked as he entered, then took his Stetson off and shook his body. Water flew.

"Damn, Charles, you could have done that down the hall," Bubba said as he started the Mr. Coffee. Charles Baird had not had many refinements when Bubba had first met him, and the intervening years had not changed him much.

"I'm too pissed to be polite today. My apologies if I ruin your decor," Baird said. He hung the slicker on the hook at the top of the door. He dropped his hat on the sofa and stretched. His hands





touched the ceiling. He might have been even taller than Bubba's six five, but he didn't weigh anywhere near three hundred pounds. His face was creased, cross checked from sun and laughter, and he had a slight scar on the left side of his nose where a skin cancer had been removed.

"You got anything to drink?" he asked.

"Coffee will be ready in a minute."

"I mean a drink. This is a private eye's office, isn't it? There should be a bottle of cheap whiskey in that desk."

"I got protein tablets, diet soda, ibuprofen, and some Midol that Kathi left."

"I'll take the coffee. Black. How you been?"

"Fine. How's the cattle business?"

"Eat up with high feed prices, high trucking costs, high vet bills, and low value per pound. The usual. That coffee ready?"

"Sit down and relax. Watch the rain. That's good for the grass, isn't it?"

"One good damn thing all day."

Charles Baird owned more than a few square miles of pasture out past Lake Wales on the southern edge of Polk County. He also owned some groves near Frostproof, a Peterbilt truck dealership in Haines City, and a pool hall in Bartow, supposedly the result of a bet on the Buccaneers. But he had grown up a cowboy on his daddy's ranch, and it had stuck.

Charles sat and crossed his red, white, and blue boots at the ankle. He interlaced his fingers behind his head.

"The world is gone to crap," he said.

"How so today?"

"There's a sumbitch that needs killing, and I don't think I can get away with doing it. My daddy would have just shot him. And worse, he's a damn Yankee. A New Englander, I think. Says car like a crow would." Charles rolled his head, and Bubba heard his neck pop. "So Bubba, I guess I'm gonna have to get you to do it for me."

Bubba poured the coffee and handed Charles his cup. Then he sat behind his desk and propped his boots on the corner. "I don't ordinarily hire out to shoot people. I'd have to have a really good reason, and even then, I'd charge extra."

"We've all become too civilized. Friends won't even protect a man's horse from a thief."

"Someone stole your horse?"

"Stole him and plans on eating him."

"Sounds like a sumbitch all right, but I'd still have to charge extra to shoot him." They sipped their coffee. Then Charles grinned. "It's been a hell of a day."

"Tell me about the sumbitch."

"I was trying to find this bay mare that had gone missing. I had a day with nothing else to do but soothe my restlessness, so I saddled up and rode down to the south end of the land, where those big oak hammocks butt into Seven-Mile Thicket running clear to the bombing range land. The only near-enough-to-heaven left in this godforsaken, overpopulated county; untouched land that's still the best deer hunting left in Florida. I don't care what those rednecks in the Panhandle say. Anyway, I find an Airstream parked there next to the hammock, electricity attached and an outhouse built. It's been since the end of last deer season that I was last down there, but this was like toadstools popping up. There's a garden and a pump house. In the shade, tied to a limb, is Martin's Daisy, the bay mare, so I ride up next to her." He sat the empty cup on the floor. "Then a guy in camos and a beard steps from behind a tree. Tells me to get off his land. I tell him that's my horse. He says the horse ate his garden, and he's gonna eat the horse. You quit laughing, Bubba Simms."

"You have a squatter on your land who eats horses?" Bubba tried to maintain his composure but failed. "Why didn't you just take the horse and leave?"

"He had a gun. One of those Browning falling blocks. Looked like a .45-70."

"He would have shot you?"

"He sure gave me the creeps. You know what it's like when you're as big as we are. Most people avoid confronting us. The ones that do are usually in the right, crazy, or just plain mean. In any case, I didn't get off my horse."

"Have the sheriff evict him."

"He says he owns the land. Inherited it."

"Does he?"

"That's what I want you to find out. That land's been our hunting refuge my entire life; I need to know who he is, is the land his, what he plans on doing with the horse. I'll pay him something nominal for the mare if it is his land, but he ain't gonna eat her. That's for damn sure."

"Don't you have a regular lawyer for land stuff?"

"Yes, but he'd blab all over about what happened. He's discreet with the legal stuff, but funny he tells everywhere. I don't feel like hearing giggles when I'm at the bank. You understand the limits of being big. Besides, you're cheaper than the dadgum lawyer."

"Use my judgment about shooting him?"

"Depends on what you plan on charging me."

"The usual rates, plus an invite to the next barbecue you have."



"Go ahead and shoot him then."

Bubba wrote down the property details and Charles's phone numbers. Charles signed the contract form and gave him two days' fee in crisp hundreds. The rain had dwindled by the time they finished. Charles put on his slicker and hat, then shook Bubba's hand. His boots pounded all the way along the hall, through the storage area, down the stairs, and out into the alley. Bubba decided he had time to drive to Bartow before the county tax office closed.

When Bubba reached the tax appraiser's office, he found Miss Hazel behind the counter in her pale blue twinset and pearls, looking very much the twinkling matron. Miss Hazel had looked the same, except in pink, when Bubba had first entered the tax appraiser's office as a rookie patrolman trying to find a road that his boss had insisted existed, but he couldn't find. Miss Hazel had known exactly where it was, when it was created, who lived on it, and why.

"Miss Hazel, you look as sparkling as a spring morning," Bubba said, leaning on the counter.

"And you look like you have grown even more than I ever imagined you could. Which road can I find for you today?"

"Charles Baird wants me to look at some land on the south side of his Lake Wales pasture, down near the bombing range land. New road, land that was inherited, is what he heard."

"That should be easy to find. All that open land with so few subdivisions." She sat at her desk and clicked quickly on the keyboard. "That would be in Range 30, Township 32, I imagine. Yes, there it is. Let me show you on the map."

She led Bubba to a long row of maps spindled on rods. She indicated one. Bubba spread it on the counter. "There it is. Dirt road created to specifications last month. It leads off of a new paved road the Department of Defense built for a research facility at the edge of the bombing range. Half mile road leading to a forty acre block belonging to Timothy Francis Behane."

"Did he buy the land?"

"Let me look at the tax records just to be sure, but I don't think so. Seems like it was a family transfer." Miss Hazel returned to her desk and made the keys clatter. She nodded and said, "As I recollected. It was owned by a Mrs. Mary Deane Behane since 1938, then transferred to Timothy and Michael Behane two years ago. Then to Timothy alone six months ago. Inheritance."

"Where does it say it was an inheritance?"

"It doesn't. He did. Mr. Behane's a nice young man, about your age. Dropped in last year to find out what he had to do about the

taxes and so forth. He had just retired from the state road department back home."

"And where would that be, Miss Hazel?"

"Massachusetts. Here is the old address we used for tax purposes. Here is the new address, county road. Will you be able to find it? I can draw you a map."

"I think I can find it. I surely thank you for your fine help, as always."

"You tell that Charles Baird to drop by himself. Not that it isn't always nice to see you, Bubba."

It was too late to drop in on Timothy Behane, so that would be tomorrow morning's project. He drove back to the office to make some phone calls up North, see what he could find out about the possibility of actual horse consumption in the past.

The information operator had an M. Behane at the address Miss Hazel had given him. He called and reached a woman who told him quickly that Mickey was at O'Malley's, where he was every day before supper, regardless of what time supper was prepared. A bartender managed to get Mickey away from the dartboard and to the phone.

"Who is this?"

"My name is Bubba Simms. I'd like to ask you about Timothy Behane. Is he your brother?"

"Sure is. What is this about?"

"I'm a private detective in Florida. I've been asked to find out if your brother ever hurt animals?"

"Timmy? Never. He worked for the state for thirty years, then he retired. Moved to Florida."

"Was he a regular hunter, outdoorsman?"

"Timmy? He used to go paintballing with us sometimes. That's about all the woods he knows. What is this all about?"

"There is a dispute about a horse trespassing on his land, and he has threatened to eat it." Bubba could hear the guffaws even as he held the phone away from his ear. He heard Mickey yelling to the bar that Timmy was going to eat a horse.

Mickey could barely speak when he returned to Bubba. "No way, man. Timmy's pulling someone's leg. He's a retired road grader operator who moved to Florida to live a quiet life. Eat a horse!" He started laughing again.

"Seriously, Mr. Behane, listen up. Your brother is living in the middle of the woods, carrying a gun. He apparently doesn't look like a nice guy improving his land."

"Impossible. He calls me every Saturday. When he does, I'll find out what is going on. This is crazy."

"If you hear from him, call me. Here is my number. I'm going out to see him tomorrow, try to resolve this without the law being involved."

"Call me tomorrow. I'm here from four till seven or so. Now you have me worried."

**I**t was before nine when Bubba turned onto the new county road that he'd had no idea existed. The paving was deep black and the stripes bright and clear. No one used this road very much. He found the dirt road that should lead to Timothy Behane's land, but he continued on the paved road. He just had to see where it went. Once he had known where every road in the county went. Now they were everywhere, like grass rhizomes. Just as he passed through a sharp S-curve, there was a chain-link gate across the road, with a small guardhouse behind and to the side. Chain-link fencing, at least ten feet high, topped with razor wire, stretched away from the gate on both sides of the road, deep into the woods. Attached to the gate was a wooden sign with white letters on a blue background: DOD WILDLIFE REFUGE RESEARCH. NO ADMITTANCE.

Bubba stopped his Bronco a couple of feet from the gate. A soldier in camos, helmet, and rifle stepped out of the guardhouse. Bubba could hear the swoosh of the AC and an oldies rock station before the door shut.

"Hi there. What is this place?" Bubba said as he climbed out of the Bronco.

"Please return to your vehicle. No one is allowed entrance."

"What if I had an appointment?"

"I would have been notified in advance."

"Who's in charge of the place?"

"I am not at liberty to disclose that or anything. Please return to your vehicle and leave."

"What if I don't want to leave?"

"You are trespassing on a government facility. Leave or you will be arrested." The soldier unslung his rifle, then he spoke into a shoulder mic. Bubba shook his head.

"I don't think so, soldier. I think if your property went all the way to here, then so would your fence. You're on your property, and I'm on county land here. Now, I'm gonna walk over to your fence and stick my business card in it. You give that to whoever your boss is and ask him to call me. I'm just a curious citizen." Bubba stuck his card in a diamond of the fence, then returned to the Bronco. The soldier took the card while Bubba backed and turned.

As he drove to Behane's land, Bubba wondered what in the world was going on. A new road in the middle of nowhere and a Department of Defense facility on it. And he had never heard a word about it. What else had happened in the county he didn't know about?

Bubba stopped the Bronco at the edge of a clearing at the end of the dirt road. An ancient live oak hammock dominated the view. The nearest tree was not the biggest, only four feet in diameter, but it still had a shade cover of over a hundred feet across. This hammock contained over fifteen mature oaks intertwined over the entire knoll. A man would be able to walk for a couple of hundred yards without ever feeling sunlight. Even at the worst of the summer heat, this place would feel cool and comfortable. A brown horse, with a rope around her neck and tied to a branch, was eating grass out in the sun. She looked at Bubba and returned to eating. A bright aluminum trailer was up on blocks. An older pickup was parked under an oak tree. There was a wooden deck with a shower nozzle on a pole next to it. A pump house sat out in the open about fifty feet away from the trailer and the trees. An old fifty-five gallon drum, standing on end, had a wisp of smoke drifting away from it. A cooler sat on a picnic table in the shade beyond the trailer. A plate with food and a fork lay next to it.

Bubba sat in the truck for a few minutes to let Behane or whoever had been eating have a chance to relax. He finally left the Bronco and stretched.

"Damn, aren't there any little people in these woods?" A man stepped out from behind one of the bigger oaks off to Bubba's left. He was carrying a rifle. He wore baggy camo pants, boots, and a nearly white T-shirt. A wild, scraggly beard covered most of his lower face.

"Well, Timothy Behane, you might know more about the little people than us rednecks."

"That's true, if me dear mother was correct. But you are the second huge fellow to come trespassing on my land in the last two days. Can't be a coincidence, can it?"

"I'm Bubba Simms. Charles Baird asked me to check on his horse and his new neighbor."

"Are you a policeman or a lawyer?"

"Retired from the Polk County Sheriff's Department. Used to look after all this part of the county. That's how I know Baird. I'm a private detective now."

"A real live private eye. My first. How does the horse look to you?"

"No bite marks that I can see."



Behane hung his head and laughed softly. He started walking over to the table, with his rifle tucked in his elbow. Bubba could see the ridges of his scapula through the shirt. He was bone skinny.

"Baird, so that's his name, startled me so bad, riding up on the horse, that I kind of freaked out. Said the first stupid thing that came out of my mouth. The horse is way too big for me to eat alone. Though looking at you, we might just be able to grill it up together and have a go." Baird reached the picnic table and sat. He waved Bubba over. "Care for a soda?"

Bubba took a can and sat across from Behane, who waved the flies off his plate and returned to his potatoes and ham.

"So Charles can collect his horse without a problem?"

"Sure. Anytime. I was just being a feisty old coot. I'm still trying to figure out how I am supposed to live out here. I've never seen so many flying insects and crawling bugs in one place in my life. How did anyone ever settle this country?"

"Only the tough came here. That and the ones who were freezing every winter up north. What made you decide to move out here? There are lots of nice places in Florida being settled every day."

"After I traded my brother my share of the family house for his share of this land that our Uncle Patrick bought back in the twenties, I got to thinking that it might be nice to return to nature. Find a purer way of life than the city. No pollution, no honking horns. Quiet evenings, lovely sunrises. No one told me about foot-long mosquitoes, fleas, and ticks everywhere. Or about red bugs."

"You found the chiggers, did you? On the Spanish moss?"

"Pulled a pile-off that oak to make a mattress for my blanket the first night I was down here. Thought I was going to die. Red welts all over my back and legs. Drove to the emergency room thinking I was having an allergy to fresh air or something. They laughed at me. Pulled a few ticks off that I had missed and gave me calamine lotion."

"At least you didn't wipe your butt with it, like most newcomers do when they're camping."

Behane smiled and nodded while he chewed the last bite of food. "But I'm beginning to like it. I can't believe how many deer there are in these woods. I've learned their tracks and follow them. Bought me a genuine old-timey deer rifle. Browning single-shot .45-70." He patted the stock lying on the table. "When does deer season start?"

"In the fall sometime. Ask Baird, he knows that stuff like the Bible. He's a real neighbor when you need help. Mind if I call him and let him know to get the horse?"

Behane waved his permission. Using the car phone, Bubba caught Charles at the first number. He said he'd have a trailer there in thirty minutes. Would he wait and make sure everything went smooth? Bubba agreed. He returned to the table and told Behane the horse would be gone soon.

"I'll sort of miss her. I guess I ought to get a dog. It does get lonesome out here. Nearest town is about eight miles."

"How about your friends down the road at DOD?"

"Them soldier boys. Ran me off from their gate. Scared me a couple of times when I was walking along their fence. Jumped out of the bushes and told me to stay away from the fence. That I was trespassing. Did you know that fence runs in a two-mile square? Eight miles of ten-foot fencing. Can you imagine how much of our money the government spent for that?"

"I had no idea there was anything out here at all. Makes me feel old and forgetful."

Behane took his paper plate and the empty cans to the trash barrel. Bubba turned his body and leaned against the tree that butted the end of the table, put his legs on the bench on his side of the table. There was a breeze blowing in from the west. The oak's limb rustled and waved. Behane returned and stretched out on the other bench of the table. The day was beginning to warm, but the shade was cool. After a few minutes of quiet, two squirrels ran to the end of a branch and began to fuss. Then they began some complicated game of tag, producing no clear-cut winner.

"It is nice out here," Bubba said.

"It's like this all the time, except when it rains. Or the mosquitoes come out. Or the deer flies find me. Or I want to hear a joke."

"There are worse places."

Behane agreed and fell silent. Bubba had nearly dozed off when the sound of a badly muffled engine came through the woods. They both sat up as the pickup and horse trailer came into view. The driver made a quick half circle in the clearing, then backed the trailer straight toward the horse, stopping about ten steps away. The horse perked her ears, lifted her head.

The truck door opened and a lean man with boots, Levi's, and a straw Stetson stepped out. "Mr. Baird sent me to fetch Daisy Mae, excuse me, Martin's Daisy, out of Red Rock."

Behane nodded and said, "There she is. Tell him I'm sorry for the misunderstanding."

The cowboy nodded back. He opened the end of the horse trailer and propped the doors. Then he reached into the bed of the pickup and found a bridle. He walked over to the horse, said a few quiet words, untied the rope, and slipped the bridle onto her. She

followed him to the trailer and entered quickly as he unsnapped the lead. He closed the trailer doors, set the latch. He nodded at Bubba and Behane, then drove carefully across the clearing and down the dirt road.

"It is always enjoyable to watch an expert at work," Behane said when the engine noise had disappeared. Bubba agreed.

"This is a nice place. I could sit here in the shade, but I think I better get back to work. It's been a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Behane."

"Call me Tim. And the pleasure was all mine. Come back anytime."

Bubba gave him one of his cards and told him that he would call Mickey and reassure him that his brother was fitting in nicely in Florida. They shook and Bubba drove away. When he arrived at his office, he found a message on the answering machine from a Colonel Hughes, the director of the DOD facility, apologizing for any inconvenience he might have had with the sentry. He left a phone number and an invitation for Bubba to call with any questions. Bubba wrote the number on his blotter for another day. Later in the day, he called O'Malley's and made Mickey laugh again over his brother, Grizzly Behane. But the elder Behane sounded relieved underneath the joking. Bubba thought that it had been an interesting way to make five hundred dollars. He'd write Charles a report tomorrow, and then maybe he'd find out more about four square miles of fenced-in deer woods.

Two days later, he had a very informative conversation with Colonel Hughes. The colonel explained that the facility was designed to measure the impact of sonic booms and low-level aircraft noise on the gestation periods of mammals, including deer, raccoons, and opossums. The fencing, while not totally adequate for containing the raccoons, was decidedly effective for deer and opossums. The deer would be sampled for weight and health. The size and health of the young-of-the-year deer would be measured each fall. The DOD hoped that the study would show that the active use of the bombing range was having no ill effects on the native wildlife. The colonel also promised that the guards would be more sensitive to the needs of Mr. Behane and any other of the nearby landowners. It was a well-constructed and -delivered lecture designed to reassure everyone of the good intentions of the Department of Defense. Bubba felt reassured enough to immediately head to Big Al's and do heavy squats until his legs were trembling with exhaustion.

The next day he called Charles Baird and relayed the gist of the informative lecture from Colonel Hughes. They both agreed that

the last thing the DOD was doing was monitoring deer for sonic boom stress, but they further agreed that it was federal government business and not theirs. That decided, Charles said he'd take a ride around the fence and see what he could see. Bubba intended to talk to the county patrolmen working that sector.

Life interfered. Bubba had to surveil a disabled slip-and-fall victim until she jumped sideways with her walker when the neighbor turned on his sprinkler, which had somehow become reoriented to soak her front porch. Soon the summer ended, and it was autumn before Charles and Bubba talked again. They met at Fatboy's Barbecue on Highway 27. It seemed appropriate.

Charles was holding court with the customers and waitresses when Bubba arrived. Bubba ordered a quart of iced tea unsweetened while he decided between ribs and a lot of ribs. Charles finished telling all about the ease and suitability of artificial insemination with the modern Brangus cattle herd.

"Do you really wear a rubber glove all the way to your armpit?" Bubba asked after he ordered a slab of ribs. Charles had already ordered and was in need of a refill on his tea.

"Of course. Otherwise it seems too personal." The food arrived and slowed further conversation. After a time, Bubba wiped his face with a large paper napkin and said, "What are the Feds up to?"

"They built an impressive fence. Supposedly they plan on a total kill every three years to see how the herd is progressing. Then they'll restock the site. They have cleared a path inside the fence wide enough for a Humvee to drive around on patrol. But it's nuts."

"How so?"

"The brush is so thick on the east side that there is no way they can ever find all the deer that are in that pen. With a couple of packs of dogs and some skilled hunters they might, in six months, kill them all. Besides, whoever told them that they could keep a clear path around that fence never lived in the Imperial Polk County paradise. The damn stuff is growing so fast that they're having to drive around brush thickets now, after only six months. They will never do what they say they're doing."

"So it's typical government fubar?"

"Maybe, but they seem so efficient and unconcerned about the actual land. I spoke to that same colonel. He assured me that they had taken all those parameters into account. Parameters, my ass."

"Have you seen Behane?"

"My boys see him once in a while. He's really getting into the woodsman routine. Last time they saw him, he was barefoot, no shirt, carrying that Browning."

"I think I'll drop by after we eat. He's not so far away."

"Good idea. Have you heard anything from your county mountain buddies?"

"Not yet. I've been busy, working for State Wide on an insurance case."

"That place bothers me. All government bothers me, but it is coming up on election time. They'll be hitting me up for some serious contributions. This time I want a few questions answered before I write a check or two."

"It might be just what they say." Bubba finished gnawing on the last rib. The beans were gone, the Texas toast consumed with most of the french fries. He'd had enough—for now.

"Might, but I hate the idea of a fence that big up against my land. Right in the middle of my hunting range."

"Florida grows. Won't stop for us."

"You want dessert?"

"Not today."

"We're getting to be grownups, Bubba. I remember when you were lean and mean, and I was a stud-duck cowboy. You were the first person I ever met near as big as me. Good thing you carried a gun and a badge, otherwise we'd have had to see who was the meanest. Now we don't even have room for dessert."

"There are supposed to be ten times as many people here as when I drove that Crown Vic around trying not to get lost on every other dirt road. But what are we going to do? I even know my cholesterol nowadays."

"Go on with our lives and keep an eye out for strangers. Like always." Charles picked up the check. "I'm going to put some food on this for Behane. He was pretty skinny, my boys said. Don't eat it on the way there."

They stood and shook. Charles strode toward the register, calling out insults to three men sitting at a table in the front. They all laughed. After a few minutes, the waitress brought Bubba a white paper bag, heavy with food. He dropped a ten on the table as an extra tip. They'd taken the table for two hours during the lunch rush, and no one had said a word.

The clearing looked desolate when Bubba reached the end of the dirt road. The trash barrel was filled to overflowing with unburned rubbish. The garden flourished with waist-high weeds. Grass grew around the pickup as if it had been unmoved in weeks. Bubba stopped and opened the door to the Bronco. He called out to Behane, but there was no answer. After a few minutes, he walked over to the picnic table and sat the bag on the top. He stretched out on the bench, leaned against the oak tree, and fell asleep.

Two hours later, as he blinked his eyes, he saw the ghost. He sat up. The ghost had disappeared. It had been a bearded, skinny ghost. Bubba decided to wait on the bench instead of running off. After a minute or so, Behane, covered with white splotches, stepped out from behind an oak tree on the far side of the hammock.

"Hi, Tim. I brought you some Fatboy's Barbecue. The best in this part of the county."

Behane walked slowly, awkwardly, as if he was unsure of his footing. When he came close, he smiled and nodded to Bubba. "I thought it was you, but I wasn't sure. I've been seeing some things lately. Been alone too much, I guess." He sat down on the other side of the table. "That smells good. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse." Then he smiled.

"Charles Baird sent it. Thought you might need feeding. We ate lunch today and were talking about you."

"I bet you were." Behane opened the sack and began to set the contents on the table. "I see his cowboys riding across my land chasing cows, but I haven't eaten any of them either. But I have been living off the land." Behane picked up a chicken leg and smelled it deeply before he took a bite. Behane had lost weight. His face had deep circles under his eyes. The eyes were dull and watery. A red welt was on the left side of his neck. The T-shirt and camos were filthy and covered with a dried white powder. The powder flecked his hair and his arms.

"You look tired, Tim. Want to come into town for a few days? Rest up. Get some regular food in you. Be happy to have you at my house."

"You want me off this land? You too?"

"No. You just look bad."

"Been staying up late at night watching the soldier boys. They wish I weren't over here watching them. I can tell." He finished the chicken leg and ate a slice of bread. He opened one of the Styrofoam containers and sniffed the beans. He tasted them, then dug in with the plastic spork that came in the bag. "They been coming around, poisoning my food. Poisoning the animals too. The food's been going bad. But you brought this, so it's safe. It is safe, isn't it?"

"I ate it for lunch. Hasn't hurt me. What's the white stuff?"

"More poison. I guess I ought to wash it off. I fell asleep last night in a thicket right beside the fence line. The deer sleep in it sometimes. I can smell them. The soldier boys came along spraying the thicket and got me. I guess I ought to wash it off." He put down the spork and wandered over to the sprinkler head on the deck. He took off his shirt and turned on the water handle.



Nothing happened. Bubba could see red splotches, like boils, dotting his back. Behane twisted the handle, then shrugged. "I guess I forgot to pay the electricity bill. No electricity, no pump. No pump, no water."

"Why don't you come back with me? Take a shower, get a good night's sleep. You'd be safe. No one messes with me."

"I bet they don't. Them soldiers are going to quit messing with me soon. I think I have their secret. Want to go see their secret?"

"Where's that?"

"Not far." Bubba nodded and started to cover the food. "Don't bother. They'll poison it while we're gone. Bring the chicken along, if you want. I might be able to eat some more in a little while. I'm full now."

Bubba carried the sack while Behane led the way. Behane followed a trail that was well worn at first, but then faded out as they went into another oak thicket. They had walked about a mile in a winding arc when Bubba could see the chain-link fence. Behane raised his hand for him to halt. Then he crawled on his hands and knees into a thicket of scrub oak and Virginia creeper, sweet briar and palmettoes. The oak trees in Seven-Mile Thicket were seldom over twelve feet high because of the poor, sandy soil, but the rest of the plants grew around, over, and between each other until they were a tangled mess. This ecosystem was ideal for deer, rabbits, raccoons, and field mice, not private detectives. Bubba sat the bag on a stump, hoping the ants wouldn't find it, and crawled in after him.

After a few feet, there was a surprisingly open space. Bubba could see where perhaps a dozen deer had bedded down. The space would have to feel safe, with tangles forming walls and ceiling. It had a smell much like a clean doghouse. Behane motioned him to follow. He crawled through another tunnel in the thicket. He reached another space big enough for him and Bubba to sit. They were within a foot of the chain-link fence. Every leaf was covered in the white powder. The ground was white. On the other side of the fence white covered everything to a height of eight or ten feet. Christmas in October.

"Here's where I hear the executions," Behane whispered. "They don't know I can get this close, but I've gotten pretty good in these woods. I could show those paintballers a thing or two now."

"Executions?" Bubba wiped sweat off his face with a bandanna. It was immediately replaced by new sweat.

"Machine gun bursts. I see the Humvees go by, and I hear them stop. Then *rat-a-tat*, they blast that machine gun that's mounted on it. They're executing someone. I know they're after me, but

they can't see me anymore. I'm too close to nature now. I'm becoming one with the forest."

Bubba nodded and looked through the fence. He didn't want to get into a deep discussion of executions and nature while sitting in a hole in a thicket with Grizzly Behane. Besides, the space was filling up with a stifling odor of unwashed neglect. He would call Mickey tonight and let him know that family needed to come down here and help out.

On the other side of the fence it was evident that a bulldozer had been scraping a path even wider than a Humvee needed. It was a good twenty-feet wide at this point. The white covered the entire ground.

"I wait here every night. I can see them plain, but they have no idea I am here. When I find the secret, I'll tell you. You and Baird are big enough to do something about it. I could maybe shoot one or two of them, but that wouldn't be any help."

"Shooting them wouldn't be a helpful thing at all, Tim." Bubba wiped his face and neck.

Tim nodded. "I'll just keep watching. Can you find your way back? It's mostly west back to the house. I'll just stay here and watch."

"I can get back. Sure you don't want to stay the night with me?"

"No, thanks. I like it here. No bugs crawl on me here."

"You want me to take the food back to your trailer?"

"Leave it there. The ants won't bother it here, and nobody can poison it." Behane stuck out his hand and shook with Bubba. "Glad you came out. I had forgotten how nice it is to talk to real people."

Bubba crawled out of the thicket. The bag of food had been ignored so far. He walked back to the Bronco without much trouble. He took an evidence bag out of the glove compartment. He still had a goodly supply left from when he was a real deputy. Scraping the white powder off his arms and pants into the bag, he thought there was enough for an analysis. It was something that needed a name.

He drove home a bit too quickly, took a shower with Elvis's flea shampoo, and ran his clothes through the washer twice. He started the Mr. Coffee and microwaved a frozen cheese danish for fifteen seconds. Clean, with his return to civilization firmly established, Bubba reached for the telephone. Mickey had not been at O'Malley's very long and so immediately agreed on the severity of his brother's problem. He promised to make plans to be there as soon as work would let him off, and he could get a flight out of Boston for Orlando. He'd be there soon.

Baird said that he'd make sure that any of his people working the south end of the range would keep an eye out for Behane, and that

he would call a friend at Florida Power and get the electricity turned back on today. He said to take the powder to Environmental Technologies in Bartow. His cousin was the chemist there; he'd find out what the powder was immediately.

Then Bubba called the dispatcher at the Sheriff's Department. After they reminisced for a few minutes about how much fun it used to be riding in a patrol car, Bubba found out that his buddy, young Corporal Marx, was supervising the patrols in the lower eastern quadrant of the county. He'd be the one to talk to about what was happening in that sector.

Bubba caught Marx at home, just coming off shift. They agreed to meet the following morning at Behane's dirt road. Marx was late for the gym and didn't have time to talk right then.

The next morning Bubba got up early, went to Big Al's, and did his upper body routine until he was soaked with sweat. Once showered and shaved, he went to Happ's for a real breakfast and conversation with the early morning shakers and movers of the area. Two generations of Happ's had been serving breakfast and lunch to the backbone of the establishment. Anything worth gossiping about passed through there first or, at worst, second.

For a change, Bubba brought the gossip. No one had heard much of anything about a DOD project in their back yard. After he finished his omelet, his five pieces of bacon, and four slices of rye toast, Bubba knew that by tomorrow whatever was known about the fenced compound would be the conversation at Happ's.

He drove home and picked up Elvis. He'd been stuck in his pen for the last few days and going to the woods was a just reward for not howling all night. When Bubba arrived at the dirt road, Marx was sitting in his patrol car with the windows down, enjoying the fall breeze. Elvis had hung his head out the passenger window and howled for twenty miles down Highway 27. He was a happy dog. Bubba stopped beside Marx's patrol car so they could talk without having to get out.

"Good morning, Corporal. Are you enjoying those new stripes?"

"I am. Despite the meetings and the paperwork. Better to boss than be bossed." Marx's shaved head gleamed in the morning light.

"Want to go down to Behane's place with me?"

"I better stay up here. I'm an officer short this morning. If shit happens, I need to be near. What's going on out here?"

Bubba told him about Behane and the changes in his behavior. About the executions and the white powder. Marx lifted his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Why didn't he just buy a condo and play shuffleboard like all the others do?"

"The purity of Florida called him. Have you had any problems with the DOD site?"

"Other than plain rudeness, no. I introduced myself to the gate guards on various shifts, and they were uniformly rude. That was a joke. They informed me about not needing any stinking civilians helping them; they were the U.S. Army. I talked to a colonel, and he led me down the primrose path. But no actual problems."

"Have you been able to keep an eye on them at all?"

"My officers, as part of their regular duty, patrol all county roads and observe. There are four Humvees and three government sedans that come and go. None of the vehicles ever stop in Polk County. They must be going to Tampa, maybe to MacDill Air Force Base, when they leave. Thirty-two soldiers—twenty-six male, six female—eight civilians and, as of yesterday, two truckloads of U.S. Game and Wildlife men, rifles, and a pack of dogs."

"But have you been able to learn anything?"

"The sheriff isn't the least bit interested in what is going on. Not his precinct, he says. Really, he did."

"Something's going on, but my real worry is Behane. I think he's going nuts."

"I could Baker Act him for seventy-two hours for observation."

"His brother is supposed to be coming down in a few days. He can do that if he needs to. Colonel Hughes said they were going to do deer studies. Sounds more like hunting season to me. If the dogs chase the deer, you'll have to shoot them to study them."

"My thoughts exactly. A fenced area, dogs, professional hunters. Deer eradication is more like it."

Marx's radio gurgled. He acknowledged it, punched an entry on his dashboard computer, and said, "Got to run. A wreck on 27. Call me if there is anything else I can do."

"Will do."

The clearing at the end of the road looked the same as yesterday. Elvis ran around with his nose to the ground, stopped a few times and sneezed, then howled. The water came on, the pump hummed when Bubba opened the shower valve. Once again, Bubba sat on the picnic bench against the oak tree and watched Elvis run circles and howl. The picnic table was comfortable enough that Bubba thought he'd put one in his living room for guests. While he waited, he got up once to open a faucet for Elvis to drink, and once to donate morning coffee to the aquifer. After the morning ended and no Behane, he left, heading for Bartow and Environmental Technologies. When he arrived, he parked, leaving the windows partially down. The day was cool and Elvis would be fine. A harried receptionist paused in her data entry to buzz the

back. A tall, skinny man with his glasses on a cord around his neck came out and introduced himself.

"Do you have the sample Cousin Charles called about?"

"Here it is. The stuff had been sprayed all over the ground and the surrounding woods."

"Hmm." The man held the sample up to the light, then opened the bag and waved the aroma toward his nose. "Hmm." He turned toward the door he had entered through. "Oh, I'll call Cousin Charles as soon as I know something." And he left the room.

Bubba looked at the receptionist, who shrugged. Bubba returned to the Bronco and drove home. Elvis slept all the way.

There was a message from Mickey Behane saying that he would be arriving in three days, the fastest he could get there. Call him if there was any news. Bubba called, but Colonel Hughes was out of the office. No idea when he would return. Bubba tried to think of something useful he could do; a nap was out of the question. So he fed Elvis and changed the water in his pen. He put in a load of laundry, then checked his answering machine. Nothing. He threw the tennis ball for Elvis out the porch door and down the slope. Elvis enjoyed that for a while, then he decided that a nap was called for. Bubba put the towels in the dryer. He called the office and checked the answering machine there. Nothing. He was wasting the day. He needed to be back at Behane's. When he found Tim, he'd take him out of the woods regardless of what he thought of the idea.

That decided, he checked the back of the Bronco for supplies. There was plenty of insect repellent, a couple of blankets, a folding shovel, a roll of paper towels, more than one flashlight: all the usual things needed to go off-road. He filled a cooler with drinks and food in plastic baggies. He changed into heavier trousers and pulled a sweatshirt over his T-shirt. He laced up his hiking boots, then put the Browning Hi-Power under the front seat. After the Bronco was loaded, he put Elvis in his pen and left.

It was nearly dark when he reached the clearing. He parked and off-loaded the cooler onto the now familiar picnic table. He walked around the clearing, but there didn't appear to be anything different from the morning. Before it became absolute dark, he layered a blanket on the bench, sat on it, and leaned back against the oak tree. There was a flashlight on the table, a blanket for when the temperature dropped, and the Browning in its holster. Quickly, it became night. No moon and darn few stars. Bubba could hear the mosquitoes buzzing around, but none landed on him. DEET was a very effective chemical.

His watch said almost eleven when the cold woke him. He stood and walked around. The woods were busy with rustling

limbs and bustling insects, but nothing out of the ordinary. Bubba sat in the dark and ate a sandwich and some cookies and drank a diet soda. He'd forgotten a thermos of coffee. He wondered how big a thermos Davy Crockett had carried.

Just before four, Bubba reluctantly eased out from under the blanket and headed for the outhouse. He took the roll of paper towels and a flashlight. There were some things that needed illumination. He had almost returned to the picnic table when he heard the faint crack of a high-powered rifle, then another. The sound came from the south and east. Then there was a deeper rifle shot. That was quickly followed by what could only be automatic weapons fire. One burst, then a second. There was quiet for a moment, then a third rip of automatic fire. The deeper rifle fired again. Immediately following, both of the other rifles fired. Then there came a long burst from the lighter machine gun. Bubba opened the Bronco door and grabbed the car phone. He dialed Marx's number. He answered after three rings, "This better be important."

"This is Simms. I'm at Behane's. I hear automatic weapons fire close by."

"Stay where you are. I'll be there in thirty minutes. I'll get my people to seal the county road. But I'll be the first to you. You'd make an easy target. Be careful." The phone went dead.

Baird answered on the first ring. "Charles, this is Bubba. I am at Behane's. There's automatic weapons fire in the woods. Behane's not in camp."

"Hang tight. We'll be there in a hurry. You stay at Behane's. We'll find him together. You hear me?"

"I hear you." He hung up. Automatic weapons fired again. The deeper rifle fired. That had to be the .45-70. What in the hell was Tim shooting at? Had to be the soldiers. Who else had automatic weapons?

Bubba locked the Bronco. Taking the bigger flashlight, he stuck the Browning's holster on his belt. Behane had to be in the thicket. He had to be, or Bubba would never find him in the dark. He let the flashlight play across the ground in front of him. The trail that he'd followed before was fairly easy to spot at first. But after ten minutes the trail seemed to disappear. He tried to remember how he'd come before, but the woods looked the same in all directions.

There was another burst of automatic weapons fire. Bubba burst through the scrub oaks and briars, hearing his trousers tear. There was the trail again. When the .45-70 fired again, all of the other weapons cut loose. The sound was deafening. Two or three searchlights webbed through the thicket. He could hear voices. He



doused his light and crept closer, until he could finally understand them.

"We can't cut the fence, stupid. That's the prime directive. The colonel will have us in the stockade if we do."

"Well, that old fart has killed three of my dogs, and I'll kill him with your help or not."

"I tell you what we are going to do. You two stay here and keep him busy. The rest of us are leaving the compound. We'll go to his place and then work our way here. We can use your fire to guide us."

"We better hurry. It'll be getting light soon."

Bubba began to crawl toward the hole that Tim had shown him. He heard two vehicles crank up and leave. Then there was a burst of fire about six feet above the ground. He lay on his stomach and began to move through the thicket as quietly as he could. The soldiers fired another burst, and Bubba crawled faster. They wouldn't be able to hear him for a few minutes. He reached the hollowed-out space and sat up. He was tempted to turn on the flashlight but knew it would draw fire. Then a light from the other side of the fence swiped across the thicket. Brass flickered on the ground. This was the place.

Then Bubba felt a cold metal object touch his neck. And a hammer click.

"It's me, Bubba Simms. It's okay, Tim. I'll help you." The object wavered and then moved away.

"Is that really you? They're trying to kill me. Tonight's the night. They had the hounds after me. Even had one at my place this afternoon."

"That was me and my dog. But those soldiers are after you all right. Let me help you get out of here."

"I can't walk anymore. Too tired. But I can still shoot."

"No more, Tim. Let's get out of here. People are coming to help you."

There was only silence. Bubba could hear the soldiers across the fence, arguing about what to do next.

"Tim," Bubba said into the silence. He reached out to where the rifle barrel ought to be and found it. He gripped it and pulled gently. He set it down behind himself and crawled over to where Behane's voice had come from. He found the body as much by smell as by feel. It was as though he were rotting. But he still had a pulse—weak and rapid but still beating.

He tried to pull Tim by the arms as he backed through the hole in the thicket. The soldiers yelled and fired a burst that blew twigs all over them. He wouldn't be able to crawl any quieter than he had. Another burst came closer. He was going to have to run for it.

Bubba squatted down and put Behane over his shoulder. He picked up the .45-70 and took a deep breath. He stood and aimed at the searchlight that was moving toward his position. It exploded when the slug hit it. Bubba bulled through the briars and scrub oaks as fast as he could. He let his forearms take as much of the damage as he could, but Behane's back and legs were being torn also. The soldiers recovered from their surprise and fired a burst toward them, but it was to the left. Bubba broke clear of the thicket. Another burst went too far to the right. He pulled the Hi-Power out of its holster and fired eight shots as fast as he could, then ran down the trail with Behane bouncing over his shoulder.

He had gone about forty yards when his foot hit a palmetto root, and he pitched forward. Behane went flying onto the ground. Bubba knelt there, trying to catch his breath. He could hear the soldiers' voices, but there was no more firing. A second weapon might have confused them.

The stock on the .45-70 was broken, so Bubba propped it against a tree where they might find it come daylight. He picked Behane up in his arms. He had practically no flesh on his bones. He gurgled and gasped with every breath. Bubba started walking back toward the trailer and the Bronco. He had to walk slowly and carefully. The flashlight had been left behind somewhere. He couldn't afford to fall again. He'd crush Behane. After a few minutes, he locked his right hand over his left wrist. Behane was beginning to gain weight. Bubba's biceps were close to spasms when he reached the clearing. There were two Humvees parked to the left of the Bronco. Six men stood in a semicircle at the edge of the headlights' glare. A flashlight hit Bubba's face.

"Keep on coming in. Nice and easy."

"That ain't the old coot," another voice said.

Bubba walked to the picnic table.

"Hold up there!"

Bubba laid Behane down and unfastened his grip. Behane was barely breathing. Bubba reached for the folded blanket on the bench.

"Put your hands up!"

He spread the blanket over his friend. A rifle barrel jabbed him in the back.

Bubba spun around. "Back off, soldier boy."

There were two soldiers standing there. The other four men were spread out. Two of them were in civilian work clothes. The shortest one stepped forward and said, "That old coot's under arrest. He's going back with us."

"The hell he is. He's going to the hospital," Bubba said.

"He shot my dogs."

"He's probably a terrorist. He attacked a DOD compound."

"He's going back with us. We have the guns."

The voices were blending in the dark around Bubba. He knew that he had no chance if gunfire started. All he wanted to do was get Behane to a hospital before he died. The gurgling seemed even more shallow than during the carry-in.

A voice that sounded weary said, "Come on, big guy. Step aside. He's going with us. We've got the guns."

"Not all the guns." Charles Baird, on the back of a tall dark horse, moved into the edge of the light. A double-barreled shotgun rested across the saddle horn. "Hi, Bubba. You okay?"

"I'm fine. Behane needs a hospital bad."

"We'll get him there. He may be a damn horse-eating Yankee, but he's my neighbor now."

"One more opinion doesn't make a difference. He's going with us." The civilian whose dogs had been shot stepped forward with a scoped rifle in his hands.

"How about six more then? Hank." Baird eased the horse a step to the left with his knees. Another rider on the far right of the oaks moved into the light. "That's Hank. He's like me, old and losing his eyesight. We like these twelve-gauge double barrels with double-ought buck, so we can do our shooting up close. We can see what we kill that way. But the other fellows are young and technological minded. So they're out there in the dark with them fancy B&L scoped rifles. Are y'all wearing Kevlar?"

"We sure are."

"Between your eyes?"

There was no answer to that. Everyone stood where they were. Bubba was racking his brain for an answer when the first strobe of blue, blue, blue moved down the dirt road toward them. The Polk County Sheriff's Department car stopped behind the Humvees. The door opened and Marx, in full dress uniform, including DI hat, stepped out. His tailored uniform, with its twelve-inch drop from chest to waist, was crisp with starch. The soldiers unconsciously straightened up.

"What's going on here? Deer season doesn't open for another three days," Marx said, his voice penetrating the darkness.

"I've got a sick man here, Corporal Marx. Needs an ambulance," Bubba said.

Marx nodded and spoke into his shoulder mike, then he said, "EMT's on the way."

"Officer, we are arresting this old coot for shooting my dogs."

Marx turned sharply toward the civilian. "And who are you, sir?"

"I'm Dennis Jonson with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service."

"Nice to meet you, sir. But I don't think a game violation takes precedence over my invoking the Baker Act so Mr. Behane can be observed for seventy-two hours to see if he is a danger to himself."

"He's going back to the base with us. The FBI will handle him," one of the soldiers said.

"I think we have a posse comitatus here, Corporal Marx," Charles Baird said.

"I believe you are correct. Soldiers are not allowed to arrest civilians outside of military areas. I believe this is Mr. Behane's property." Marx walked toward the picnic table.

"Wait a minute, Corporal. We have more people coming here from the compound. The colonel, he can straighten this out."

"Actually, no. There is a safety-and-sobriety checkpoint setup just east of Mr. Behane's road. I doubt if any vehicles will be moving this way anytime soon." Marx reached down and checked Behane's neck pulse.

"Gentlemen, this man is in bad shape. There is an ambulance headed this way. And the sheriff himself, with at least one photographer, maybe a film crew, if he can find one this early in the morning. Your colonel will eventually arrive and will be very upset with all the commotion." There was a murmur of agreement. Baird's horse started returning the morning drink of water to the aquifer. Someone laughed.

"I see that we have two choices: One, you selfless soldiers and civilian employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have aided the Polk County Sheriff's Department and concerned neighbors with the rescue at night of a lost and disoriented elderly man. Your colonel gets his picture taken with the sheriff, and we all eat a fine breakfast. How does that sound?"

There was no answer. Marx shook his head.

"Quickly, gentlemen. I hear a motor coming. Two, I arrest all of you for criminal trespass and dangerous display of deadly weapons. Maybe it won't stick, but I know the county judges and you don't. Either way, your colonel will have his picture on the front of the papers. Do you want him smiling or frowning?"

"Smiling," a weary voice said. The soldiers headed for their Humvees and stacked the rifles inside. Baird got off his stallion. Hank rode in and dismounted. He was the same cowboy that had fetched the mare.

"Call the rest of your boys in," Bubba said.

"There's only Hank and me. All the rest of them are too young. They can't get up before sunrise. Hank was drinking coffee with me when you called. Wasn't this something?"

Two more Polk County marked cars arrived, along with an unmarked dark blue Lincoln. The EMT truck followed them. The attendants were at Behane in a moment. They had him on the gurney and loaded before the film crew from Channel 7 News could even get unpacked from their van. They were gone by the time Marx, standing at attention with his DI hat under his arm, had finished reporting to the sheriff.

"I don't need my picture on TV, do you?" Baird asked Bubba.

"I'm blocked in."

"One more reason to ride horses. Call me again when you want to have fun." He nodded toward Hank. They mounted and eased on out into the early morning mist. No one seemed to notice them vanish; everyone was too focused on the white light of the TV camera.

Bubba went for a walk while everyone milled around. He found the .45-70 but not the flashlight. Some raccoon would be doing hand puppets for the children tonight. By the time he returned, the Humvees were gone and he could leave. The colonel and the sheriff were being interviewed together by the talking head.

**H**e'd been asleep for about two hours when the phone rang. He ignored it and rolled over. It rang again. He answered it.

"This is Robert Turner at Environmental Technologies. Cousin Charles said to call you with the results of my analysis. He said you sleep late and to keep ringing."

"Yeah, thanks. What was it?"

"Dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane."

"Food additive, right? Keeps corn flakes crispy in milk."

"Oh, that's a good one. I'll have to tell the techs. No, it is plain old DDT. World's premier insecticide. Only thing is, it has been banned for use in the United States since 1972. You might want to call the EPA and let them know where you found it."

"Yeah, I'll do just that. Thanks a lot."

"My pleasure. Food additive!"

Bubba fell back asleep easily but awoke about two. He showered, once again with Elvis's flea shampoo, and started a pot of coffee. He called the Bartow County Hospital where Behane had been taken. The nurses' station said he was in serious condition but stable. Bubba fed Elvis, ate lunch, and tried to call Colonel Hughes. He was unavailable. He called Mickey Behane's house and told the wife that Tim was in the hospital. He'd probably be there for a few days at least. She said that Mickey would be there the day after tomorrow and to give Timmy her best. And that he

had good insurance with his state retirement. The card ought to be in his wallet.

Bubba arrived at Bartow County just before three. Behane was in a private room. Bubba sat and watched him for a time. He was asleep with a tube in his nose. He looked awful but smelled much better. The RN at the desk told Bubba that they were running tests to find out what was wrong. They hadn't seen anything like this before: fever, dehydrated, infected insect bites, disoriented, delusional. But he was on an IV for fluids and glucose, which were helping him.

Bubba called Colonel Hughes again. He was still unavailable. He told the orderly that the colonel had until six o'clock to come visit Mr. Behane in the hospital, or else. Bubba found a comfortable chair in the doctors' lounge and carried it to Tim's room. He sat and watched silent TV, listening to the shallow breathing.

Colonel Hughes, a tall redhead with a crewcut, arrived at a quarter to six, with a civilian in tow who carried a briefcase and had a pale complexion.

"What was so important, Mr. Simms?" Colonel Hughes said after taking a quick look at Behane. He stood erect with his hands behind his back. The civilian found an uncomfortable chair to sit in.

"Behane's life. No one seems to know what is wrong with him."

"What am I, the answer man?"

"Maybe. Do you know what dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane is?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I thought it was a food additive until I found out it was plain old DDT."

"Hooray for you."

"Then I asked myself why the DOD was spraying something that had been banned in the U.S. since 1972."

"Not banned in research facilities. We were perfectly within our rights. As our property attorney, Mr. Bangston here, can assure you. He also has a suit we are going to be serving on Mr. Behane for the destruction of government property. Those were valuable, highly trained dogs. We are looking into criminal charges."

"Behane probably has a good excuse. He's sick. With something that no one seems to be able to identify. But I can't help but wonder what he will say, or his heirs will say if he doesn't recover, about the contamination of his property by the DOD."

"We never went on his property."

"Have you ever actually left your office and gone with your spray crews? They sprayed everything in sight. Including Mr. Behane."



"That was unfortunate. An accident, I'm sure."

"Eight miles of fence. Eight miles of DDT with instructions to spray thoroughly. You've met Mr. Baird, at least on the phone. He's one of the nicest men around, but he keeps a pack of lawyers who do nothing but annoy regulatory agencies in the cattle and citrus business. I can only imagine the glee they would have in going after the DOD for groundwater contamination or such. Of course, farther down the fence is Elroy Gibbens. He hates government like an anarchist. Wait until he finds out about the DDT."

"Enough. What do you want?"

"What's wrong with Behane?"

"I'm not a medical doctor, though I do have a PhD in microbiology. I have a feeling that if Mr. Behane were to start a course of intravenous penicillin or ceftriaxone, providing his insurance covers the cost, he'd be feeling better in a matter of days."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Might be Lyme disease, from deer ticks."

"Florida doesn't have Lyme disease. Those ticks don't live down here. Everyone knows that."

"Perhaps Mr. Behane contracted it playing paintball with his friends back in Massachusetts. Mr. Behane's brother seems to think that Timothy would be better off back home with family. The government has made a generous offer for the forty acres. As a gesture of goodwill."

"It's Tim's land."

"Of course, but with the Baker Act and all, things get complicated."

"Tim may not want to sell his land."

"Of course not. But then a quiet, happy neighbor is always welcome next door to any DOD facility. There might well be some such remuneration for all his unhappiness, even his family's worry. And I am sure that a good friend, a true friend such as yourself, would be most interested in his full recovery to happy and active life, wouldn't you? The alternative being courts, doctors, hospitals, confinements."

"Okay, Behane's a quiet neighbor, but what about the research facility?"

"We have finished our work. Seems that there are no ill-effects from sonic booms on deer gestation periods. Everyone will be gone in a few more days. If poor Mr. Behane had not moved in, we would've been up and gone. No one would have even known we were there. But things happen, now we're off to new research, where it is needed."

"So the Lyme ticks can live in Florida?"

"Oh no. Much too humid. But it is always possible that a native

species could adapt to carry the bacteria. But it seems very unlikely to us."

"I hope so too."

"Bathing in a good medicated pet shampoo is an excellent way to prevent any tick problems. Feel free to call me again, if Mr. Behane does not respond. I am sure that there are specialists, who might be visiting in this area, who would be happy to consult."

"One more thing. Mr. Bangston has a paper for you to sign. It trades your silence about all conversations between us and any and all information concerning our research project that you might have learned in exchange for the squashing of a warrant for your arrest for terroristic activities against a DOD facility—firing eight rounds of 9mm at security guards. That would be a major felony, and we know the federal judges really well. There might be a warrant for Mr. Behane as well, but his quiet recovery would be reward enough for us."

Bangston stood and held out a paper for Bubba to read and sign. It seemed to cover every conversation that Bubba could ever remember having with anyone, anywhere, at anytime, about anything. He signed. No one offered to shake hands before they left.

Bubba walked out to the nurses' station and told the RN that Mr. Behane might be suffering from Lyme disease, he'd gotten into some ticks up north. The nurse said thanks, they could start on that quickly, if he weren't allergic to penicillin.

Bubba left. He headed for home. He decided that Mickey Behane could find his own way from Orlando Airport to Bartow County Hospital. Remuneration ought to be able to cover that. He'd done more than he'd planned. Tim would stay on his land or not. Anyway, what was one immigrant, more or less, to Florida? They were thick as fleas anyway. ♀

## SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ  
the killers  
From "The Killers" (1927) by Ernest Hemingway

—Ernest Hemingway

I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful

# REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

**N**o one loves a cliché more than Hollywood. So perhaps it's fitting that success in the entertainment industry so often hinges on an old saw: "It's not what you know, it's who you know." Or translated for twenty-first century Tinseltown, "Brains shmains. Your uncle's a production exec at Paramount? Welcome aboard!"

The HBO crime drama *The Wire* went the who-you-know route when recruiting many of its writers. But no one could accuse *Wire* creator/executive producer David Simon of nepotism.



*The Wire's Detectives Moreland (Wendell Pierce) and Freamon (Clarke Peters). Photo by Paul Schiraldi, courtesy HBO.*

Uncle Dave didn't hire a gaggle of nieces and nephews to write his critically beloved series. Instead, he hired some of his girlfriend's work buddies.

The catch being that Simon's girlfriend is Edgar-winning crime novelist Laura Lippman. And the "work buddies" were similarly acclaimed

authors Dennis Lehane and George Pelecanos.

"When I started hanging with Laura, she kept saying, 'You gotta read [Pelecanos]. He's digging the same mine as you,'" Simon recalls. "So I finally read [Pelecanos's 1999 novel] *The Sweet Forever*, and after that I had to go back and read all the others."

Simon felt a kinship with Pelecanos's gritty take on the modern American city: Both men hail from the Washington, D.C., area, and all of Pelecanos's books are set in and around the District's most crime-riddled neighborhoods.

So Simon asked Pelecanos about writing for *The Wire*, his epic exploration of Baltimore's drug trade, police, politics, working class, and desperate poor. Pelecanos said yes—but he wanted to contribute more than just scripts. He had some names to share too.

"After George came aboard, he started saying, 'Should we go get some other guys? Should we get LeHane? Should we get [celebrated *Clockers* author Richard] Price?'" Simon says. "They're all friends."

And all *Wire* writers, eventually.

While LeHane and Price have turned in a handful of scripts over the past few seasons, Pelecanos actually joined the staff full time. And in the world of episodic television production, "full time" doesn't mean nine to five. It means six to six—and that's on an easy day.

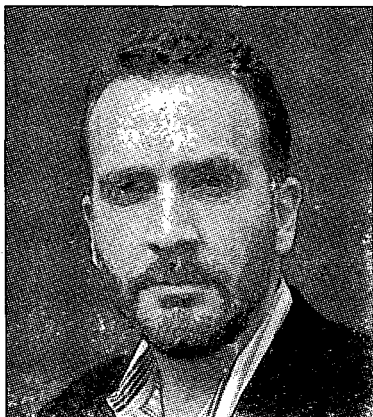
Working alongside Simon and fellow *Wire* writer/producer (and former Baltimore cop) Ed Burns, Pelecanos helped shape characters and story arcs, create scene-by-scene breakdowns for every script, cast actors, supervise pre- and post-production, and "put out fires when needed." *The Wire* may be filmed entirely on location in Baltimore, just thirty-something miles from Pelecanos's home in Silver Spring, Maryland, but the writer might as well have been commuting to the moon, considering the amount of time he had to spend away from home.

"We worked twelve to sixteen hours a day for seven months, no joke," Pelecanos says.

Of course, that kind of time commitment is no laughing matter for somebody with other deadlines to think about—like the ones in book contracts. So you won't find Pelecanos listed as a producer on the series' fourth season (which wraps up in December). Though he came back to write the season's penultimate episode, "That's Got Its Own," he chose to dial back his hands-on involvement with the show.

"Obviously, it was limiting the time I could spend with my family, and ultimately it was going to impact my novel writing, as well," says Pelecanos (whose latest book, *The Night Gardener*, was greeted with rapturous reviews in August). "I made the right choice to pull away from my producing duties. When I saw the [fourth season], I was a little bit envious that I had not been an integral part of it. They did a great job without me."

Despite Pelecanos's case of producer envy, there's probably one aspect of *The Wire* he doesn't miss: playing in someone



George Pelecanos

else's sandbox. As a novelist, he's used to following his own gut. But a TV series is a collaboration, and everyone's got their own gut to follow—which is why the writer's room can sometimes seem like a sumo ring.

"We argued passionately, to be honest with you," Pelecanos admits. "We were passionate about the show, and we all thought we were right. Conflict isn't fun, but it gets you to a place."

Such as the doghouse, for instance. Which is why Laura Lippman's name won't be popping up in the credits for *The Wire* anytime soon.

"In some ways, I have to serve as an editor, in that I have to make all the episodes connect and I have to give them the same tonality," Simon says. "So there's a lot of rewrites and a lot of arguing. I asked Laura if she was interested, but she quite correctly said, 'That's the last thing we need!'"

**L**isa Scottoline was offered her own it's-who-you-know TV opportunity recently. But it didn't lead to a behind-the-scenes gig. It's putting her front and center on national television.

A trial lawyer years before she became a bestselling writer of legal thrillers, Scottoline has done on-air commentary for *Court TV* from time to time. (She was one of the cable network's go-to legal analysts during the O. J. trial, for instance.) So when *Court TV* started looking for high-profile mystery authors to serve as on-air hosts for a new show, *America's Crime Writers: Murder They Wrote*, Scottoline was at the top of the list.



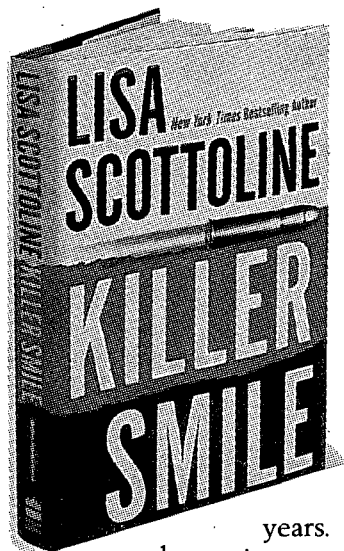
Lisa Scottoline

And what a list. Five episodes of the true-crime series have been produced so far, and the first (which premiered Monday, November 13) features Michael Connelly revisiting one of the strangest murders he covered during his days as a newspaper reporter. In subsequent entries, crime-fiction powerhouses James Ellroy, Faye Kellerman, and Jonathan Kellerman examine baffling real-life mysteries.

Scottoline closes out the show's brief run on December 11 with an episode focusing on a case she knows well: the 1979 murder of Susan Reinert, a school teacher and single mom. Though living a



seemingly mundane life in suburban Upper Merion Township, Pennsylvania, Reinert was actually the target of a bizarre conspiracy that probably claimed the lives of her two children, as well. (The kids' bodies were never found.)



"The Reinert case really strikes close to home for me," Scottoline says. "I grew up in Lower Merion, which is about ten minutes from where I live now. The high school [where Reinert taught] is exactly like my high school. And I'm a single mother and have been for most of my life. So I feel like I knew her."

Shockingly, the men accused of Reinert's murder were coworkers of hers: her school's former principal and an English teacher with whom

Reinert was allegedly having an affair. Yet many aspects of the case remain murky even after all these

years. Scottoline hopes her episode—and

her unique perspective on the case—can help shine some light into the shadows.

"Sometimes in lesser [true-crime] shows or books, it's all about serial killers and the bodies mounting up, and none of the deaths really have the dramatic impact they deserve," she says. "That's why I think it was important to do justice to Susan Reinert. And I think we did that in this show."

Of course as a former trial attorney, Scottoline has had plenty of practice talking about justice. Yet she quickly discovered that what works in a court room doesn't necessarily work on the boob tube.

"I'm sort of glib and talk a lot, and [on TV] you have to talk slower and not be so Italian," jokes Scottoline (who'll let actors do all the talking if a proposed Fox series based on her Rosato & Associates books takes off). "I had to sit down on camera, which was very hard for me. I never sit down. I was like, 'Can't I stand up and pace?' And they said, 'No. Sit still. And don't use your hands so much.'"

Though she hasn't seen her episode yet, Scottoline's guardedly optimistic that her on-camera performance turned out alright. But don't ask her if she feels like *Court TV*'s Robert Stack.

"How dare you?" she roars with mock indignation. "I prefer *Court TV*'s Katie Couric."





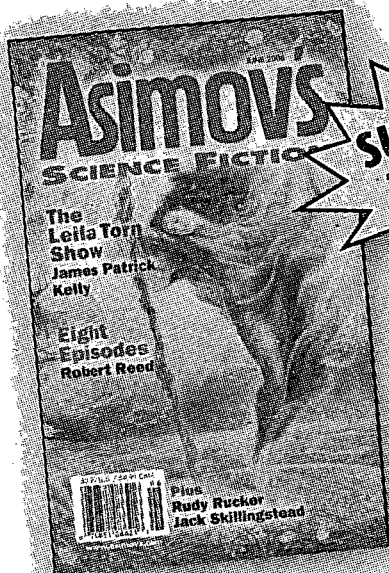
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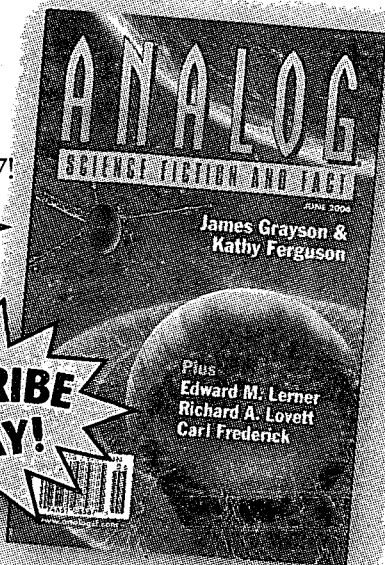
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# NOT THE TYPE

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EVE FISHER

Carrie met Thomas Porter and knew at once he was the one she'd waited for. Oh sure, his face could have been a little less long, his lips fuller, a little more hair on his chest and his head. But he was handsome enough, he would do . . . and he wanted her.

The first time she saw him, he looked wistful, wondering, curious—at her. So, for the first time in her life, she came on strong—for her—and placed herself so that he almost had to speak to her. And he did. They talked, pleasantly, nothing too serious, but she let slip a couple of clever things she'd heard around the office, passing them off as hers, and his eyes lighted up. He liked clever things, she noted, and ransacked her brain for more.

He didn't ask her out. Carrie was used to that. She'd never been picked up at a party or in a bar in her life. She wasn't the type. But this time, when the man said, "Well, it was nice talking to you. See you around," Carrie panicked. She didn't show it, but the next night she was back, waiting, her heart beating hard until he spoke to her again.

It took two weeks for him to ask her out. By then, she'd found out that he liked jazz, was an almost vegetarian, hoped to become partner in his law firm someday, and that he was almost as lonely as she was.

They dated for a couple of months before they became intimate. The relief Carrie felt when he finally dived on her, like a drowning man on a raft, overwhelmed any sensual feelings of her own. She had negotiated the second hurdle. Now to get through the next, and the next, until she had become a permanent part of his life.

She met his friends, who all had the same reaction on meeting her: surprise, hastily hidden. She didn't mind. She knew by now that he was getting over a bad breakup with a woman named Melissa, who'd turned his world upside down, changed his life, and then dumped him. Carrie put the look in Tom's eyes and his friends' reaction together and knew that Melissa must have been her exact opposite: tall, beautiful, confident, overtly sexual. In a

strange way, it gave her confidence. Carrie had been up against beautiful people all her life, and she knew that while beauty had innumerable advantages, it also had limitations, among them fickleness, arrogance, and a lack of attention to details such as cooking, cleaning, and soothing sympathy. Carrie excelled at details.

They were living together by Thanksgiving. Carrie put everything she had into making Tom happy. Feeling accepted as a couple, Carrie hosted a holiday meal at their place, inviting all of Tom's friends who were only too happy to avoid going home for a family reunion. Carrie was clever enough not to serve a traditional dinner; she served an endless buffet of hors d'oeuvres, desserts, and wine.

The evening was almost over when she heard Warren, one of Tom's friends, say "I heard that Melissa and Maggie are back from Pittsburgh." She saw Tom pale slightly. Panic gripped her, but she made herself smile and say, "Well, that's nice."

"Yes," Tom said.

"Probably see them at Mac's party."

"Yes," Tom said. "Hey, Carrie, should I open another bottle of wine?"

"Of course."

That night Carrie lay beside Tom and made plans that ranged from getting a complete makeover to moving out to clawing Melissa's beautiful face to ribbons. How dare she come back after ruining Tom's life? How dare she come back and ruin Carrie's life? What on earth was Warren thinking, letting a bomb like that drop so casually at Carrie's party? If Warren thought he'd ever be invited back, he could just go to hell. And what if Tom . . . No, that couldn't happen. She wouldn't let it happen.

The next morning, when Tom asked if she was all right, Carrie laughed and said she'd just had too much wine the night before.

Carrie didn't want to go to Mac's party, and she wouldn't have missed it for the world. She spent hours shopping for a new outfit and spent a fortune on a spangled gypsy affair that was so not her that when she finally tried it on at home she burst into tears. She tore it off, thrust it in the back of the closet, and ended up never wearing it at all.

Mac's party was crowded. Carrie's head was throbbing as she looked around, trying to find out who was Melissa without asking. Finally, she spotted a statuesque blonde she'd never seen before, standing by a window, talking to a small, dark woman. That was her. She could tell by the way Tom's back tightened slightly under her hand.

"You go mingle," she told Tom. "I need to run to the ladies' room."

Tom headed off, away from the blonde. Carrie's mouth tightened for a minute, then she relaxed. She went to the bathroom—she didn't believe in unnecessary lies—and then she came out and drifted toward the window. Warren was there, talking to the two women.

"Warren," Carrie called out. "Have you seen Tom?"

"Oh, he's somewhere around. Carrie, I don't think you've met Melissa and Maggie."

"No, I haven't," Carrie said brightly.

"Nice to meet you," Melissa said. She was gorgeous, with her blond hair piled high and her black chiffon dress curling around her like smoke. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Really? I've heard a lot about you too."

Melissa smiled. "That's nice."

"So you just got back from Pittsburgh. What were you doing there?"

"Oh, I had a show," Melissa said. "I'm an artist."

She would be, Carrie thought with despair. "Really? What do you do?"

"Mostly watercolors, but a little pen and ink." The other woman had drifted away. "You haven't seen any of my work?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't." Tom had probably ripped them all up, Carrie thought. "But I'd love to."

"Well, Mac's got a couple of pieces, if you'd like to see them. They're in his bedroom. Would you . . . ?"

"That would be wonderful."

As the two worked their way through the crowd, Carrie caught sight of Tom talking to Maggie. He glanced at them as they went, and she could see—could almost feel—his fear. Don't worry, she thought. I won't betray you. I'll defend you. And she went into the bedroom with her rival.

Carrie spent most of an hour talking to the woman. She was everything Carrie had conjectured, and worse. Two snippets of information made Carrie thrill with apprehension. At one point, when they were looking at the watercolor of a garden, with a chair arm, and a man's arm on it, and an "M" slashed across the corner, Melissa had said, "Yes, I did that when Tom was still—" and she broke off, leaving Carrie to fill in the blank with "still with me." Later, when Carrie said she had to go find Tom, Melissa had said, "He's a such a sweet guy. It's a real shame. . . ." And her eyes had been wet.

The bitch, Carrie thought all the way home. She's come back to

get him back. To get him away from me. And then she'll just dump him all over again. It'll ruin his life. And mine. And . . .

It was obvious that Tom had been rattled by seeing Melissa again. And, even though he'd been good and hadn't spent any time talking to her—partially thanks to Carrie's running interference—Carrie knew in her bones that sooner or later something was going to happen. He was nervous, he was jumpy, he kept glancing at the telephone.

Carrie found out that while Melissa and Maggie were roommates, Maggie was engaged to be married to some guy she'd met in Pittsburgh and was planning on moving back there within the month. This would leave Melissa at loose ends, probably broke—what artist ever made enough to pay the rent?—and Tom, with his good job, his good looks, his good heart, his good broken heart, was an obvious target.

Something was going to happen. Melissa, of course, would be the aggressor.

Over the next couple of weeks, Carrie kept an eye out at every social event for the dynamic duo, as she tagged them in her mind. They weren't always there, but neither ever showed up without the other. Best friends, she'd been told. She thought it looked . . . well, Tom would have known, so *that* wasn't true. Carrie always made a point of speaking to them. She also made a point of never using Melissa's name, a tiny superstition that made her feel in control. Nobody seemed to notice. Melissa always chatted brightly, but Maggie was elusive, going off for a drink or simply standing still, quiet, plain, uninterested, uninteresting. Carrie pitied her future husband: He'd be bored to death in no time.

One night they came home from work and found a parcel on the doorstep. Tom opened it and found a watercolor of purple irises, signed with that slashing "M." Tom was obviously embarrassed. "Isn't that sweet of her?" he asked twice.

"Very," Carrie said.

Tom looked at her nervously. "It could go in the kitchen. By the window. Couldn't it?"

"Of course."

Carrie watched as he hung the picture. It was lovely. It was Tom's favorite flower. It was a message. It was obvious.

The next day, Carrie went over to Melissa's. She'd gotten the address from the phone book. Her heart thumping, her mouth dry, her palms sweaty, she rang the doorbell. Nobody answered. She tried the door. It was unlocked. She went in and saw boxes everywhere. Of course. Maggie was moving out. Melissa was getting the nest ready for Tom. She walked through the living room,

past the kitchen door, into the hallway. She could hear water running in the bathroom. Someone was taking a shower. She hoped it was Melissa, not Maggie. She crept down the hall and put her hand in her coat pocket, on the gun she'd bought at the pawnbroker's earlier. She opened the door. The person in the shower cried out, "What the—! Who's there?" A hand reached out from behind the shower curtain, dragged it back, revealing Melissa's magnificent blond body. Carrie, choking with envy, jealousy, and rage, pulled out the gun and fired.

Carrie looked down at herself. Not a drop of blood had splattered on her. She stepped back, out of the bathroom. She ran, screaming, out of the apartment complex, down the parking lot, stopped in front of a Dempsey dumpster, and dropped the gun unobtrusively among the garbage, then her gloves, as she dry-heaved into it. She surprised herself by actually throwing up. Then she ran, screaming, around the parking lot until someone finally came out to see what was wrong.

The police came. Tom came. He held her as she said, "I came to thank her . . . she'd given us a wedding present . . . or, or, just a present, I don't know, a watercolor. Of purple irises. So I came to say . . . And then I found her . . ."

An officer came in from the kitchen, saying, "Her roommate's on her way. Haven't been able to get in touch with her fiancé yet. Any ideas?"

Carrie looked at the officer, her mouth half open. Tom shook his head. He was crying. "They were getting married next week," he managed to say.

Carrie pulled herself out of Tom's arms and sat down on the couch. Tom sank beside her. People were coming and going in the house, occasionally kicking one of the boxes, people were talking, occasionally at her, but Carrie didn't hear any of them. She was waiting. After what seemed like hours, the small, dark, plain woman came running in the door and gasped, "I'm Melissa Ordway. What happened to Maggie?"



# HUMBUG

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STEVE HOCKENSMITH

**S**crooge was dead. There was no doubt whatever about that. Compared to his battered, shattered body, a doornail would have seemed positively rambunctious.

A doornail, after all, might be run over by a team of horses pulling a wagonload of fresh-cut Christmas trees and come away none the worse for wear. Put a frail old man to the same test, however, and he not only finds himself the worse for it, he finds himself extremely, irrefutably, irreversibly dead.

Or, to be more precise, he *is found* thus, as the only thing such an individual would be capable of finding himself is his eternal reward—and perhaps, as in the case of Ebenezer Scrooge, his lack of same.

Scrooge had not been a very good man. But he was, as has been so firmly established, a very dead man. And that made Inspector Bucket of the Detective Police a very curious man.

A few minutes before Scrooge was juiced beneath the wagon wheels like a shriveled grape, the detective had been heading home for his Christmas Eve supper, having just dropped off a matching pair of handcuffed jewelry thieves at E Division headquarters. He was debating whether or not to surprise the wife with a pre-Christmas present—the new collection of stories by the American master of the macabre, Edgar Allan Poe—when he'd encountered Scrooge capering up and down the sidewalk, talking to himself.

It was immediately apparent that this was no ordinary lunatic. Though out-of-doors in the chilly damp, the old man wore no top-coat, hat, gloves, or scarf, appearing perfectly happy to cavort in the slush in a simple black business suit. His clothes were well tailored and neat but years out of date, suggesting an owner with full pockets he was nevertheless reluctant to reach into to accommodate such a fickle thing as fashion. He also appeared to be a man of some renown, for people were stopping to stare in wide-eyed amazement and say, "Look at the old pinchpenny! Do you think his conscience has driven him mad at last?"



Bucket had just noticed the sign over a nearby warehouse door—SCROOGE & MARLEY, it read—when the old man came scurrying up to him.

"My dear sir!" he bellowed, spewing frothy spittle that fell as softly as snow on the detective's greatcoat. "How do you do? I hope you succeeded yesterday. It was very kind of you. A merry Christmas to you, sir!"

"M-M-Mr. Scrooge?" Bucket stammered, unnerved that the old bedlamite thought him an acquaintance.

Bucket had never met the man, but he knew him by (foul) reputation. Scrooge was a usurer, a lender of money at such fantastic rates that the interest compounded not so much annually, monthly, or even weekly, but by the second. The almshouses were packed wall-to-fetid-wall with his former clients ("prey," some called them), and many a London child would spend Christmas shivering on the street instead of nestled before the family fireplace because a penniless father had defaulted to the pitiless Scrooge.

"Yes!" Scrooge crowed. "That is my name, and I fear it may not be pleasant to you. Allow me to ask your pardon. And will you have the goodness—" The old man pulled the detective closer and whispered in his ear. "—to accept a donation of two hundred pounds toward your most excellent charity."

Bucket realized then that Scrooge's strange behavior wasn't born of natural dementia, but arose instead from the vapors of a Chinaman's pipe: The bitter smell of opium clung to the old man's clothes.

"My dear sir, I don't know what to say to such munificence," Bucket said, peeling Scrooge's gnarled hand from his arm and giving it a hearty shake. Best to just placate the man and let him go his mad, merry way, the detective had decided. There was, after all, no law against putting poppy seed to whatever use one wished. And what's more, Bucket wanted to go home.

"Don't say anything, please," Scrooge replied, delighted. "Come and see me. Will you come and see me?"

"I will."

"Thank you." Scrooge reached up to tip his top hat to Bucket. There was no such hat upon his head, but he tipped it all the same. "I am much obliged to you. I thank you fifty times. Bless you!"

And with that, Scrooge turned, took a few zigzagging steps away, and stopped before a stray cat that stared at him from the front steps of a poulterer's shop.

"Is your master at home, my dear?" Scrooge asked the cat.

"Meow."

"Where is he, my love?"

"Meow meow."

"Thank you."

And so on. There followed a brief conversation with a heap of dirty snow Scrooge addressed as "Fred" and a cart of roasted chestnuts he called "Bob," after which he christened a discarded sack of rotten potatoes "Tim" and proceeded to give it a piggyback ride.

When the old man dropped the potatoes and darted into the street to wish a very merry Christmas to a steaming pile of horse dung, Bucket finally decided to restrain the old man for his own good. But before the detective could take a step, the tree wagon came rolling along, and Scrooge was rolled out as flat as a Christmas cookie.

Scrooge's passing produced nary a tear from those who witnessed it. What it did yield—from Inspector Bucket, anyway—was a mixture of curiosity and guilt. The detective regretted not moving more quickly to restrain the old man, and he resolved to make amends for it by gathering up both Scrooge's body and the information needed for the inquest with as much alacrity and discretion as possible.

A half-penny secured the services of a gawking street urchin as his runner, and Bucket dispatched the lad on two errands, both of vital importance: first, to take news of Scrooge's death to the nearest station house; second, to take Bucket's wife the news that he would be late for supper. He then recruited as navvies a group of laborers repairing gas pipes nearby, directing them to move Scrooge's freshly pulped body to the curb. The driver of the tree wagon hopped down and followed them, pleading his case to Bucket.

"He ran right in front of me, he did! How was I to see him coming in this fog? It ain't my fault what happened!"

"Now, now, my friend—calm down. It's plain you're not to blame," Bucket said soothingly. A pear-shaped man of five and forty years, he had a softness about him that usually put others at ease—when he wanted it to. "Nevertheless, I'll need to know your name."

"My name? What for?"

"For the inquest, of course."

"Inquest? It was an accident, I tell you!"

"That is for the inquest to determine," Bucket snapped, narrowing his eyes. Suddenly, he wasn't portly. He was imposing. "*Your name.*"

"Percy Thimblewitt, sir," the wagon driver mumbled, cringing.

Bucket smiled and once again he seemed about as threatening

— as a well-stuffed pillow. "Thank you, Mr. Thimblewitt. Now . . . did you know the deceased?"

Thimblewitt said he did not, and once Bucket finished questioning the man (who had little to add beyond further proclamations of his freedom from fault), the detective moved on to the witnesses lingering nearby.

"Came skipping out a few minutes before you happened along, Scrooge did," said a chestnut vendor who parked his cart near Scrooge's office each evening. "Had a 'merry Christmas' for everyone in sight. Every *thing* too."

"The gentleman was eccentric then?" Bucket said with a waggle of his bushy eyebrows that was meant to whisper, "An opium eater, eh?"

"Eccentric? No, sir. Sour as spoilt milk, he was, but he weren't balmy. Not until tonight."

The other witnesses who knew Scrooge said the same: While the moneylender was notoriously understocked on scruples, there had been no indication that he was similarly short on marbles. No one picked up on Bucket's hints about a penchant for the pipe either.

Eventually, the clatter of hooves and the steadily growing growl of wagon wheels on stone announced the approach of a police ambulance. When the driver pulled the small, boxy vehicle to a stop before Bucket, the back doors swung open and two men clambered out.

"Police Constable Thicke! Dr. Charhart!" Bucket said. "So good of you to join me tonight!"

"Sir," Thicke said, putting on his regulation stovepipe hat and straightening his blue uniform jacket as best he could over a belly twice as prodigious as Bucket's (which was hardly insubstantial in its own right). He jerked his head at the doctor and waggled his eyebrows—a warning to Bucket to brace himself.

"Good of me?" Charhart sneered. "For it to be 'good of me,' coming here would have to be voluntary!"

Dr. Crispus Charhart was a tall, lanky man, with a face so overgrown with gray whiskers it would be impossible to say whether he was smiling or frowning were it not a commonly known fact that he *never* smiled. Despite his wild beard and fiery eyes, however, the doctor had the regal, rigid bearing of a gentleman of property and position, though perhaps one for whom both were now but a memory.

"As it so happens," he snarled, "I was dragged from my dinner simply so a man of medicine can affirm that the miserable old sod who was run over by a wagon before a dozen witnesses was killed

by—gasp, shock, alarm!—*being run over by a wagon*. As long as I'm out here in the freezing cold, shall I write out certificates for everyone else present, testifying to the fact that they are indeed still alive? It would be a task just as worthy of my time and talents, I tell you."

"It would be a fine thing, I agree, if more people would schedule their dying with our convenience in mind," Bucket replied cheerfully. "Alas, we must accommodate those rude souls who allow themselves to be shepherded from this earth at the time of Another's choosing. Such is one's lot when one signs on with Scotland Yard—or accepts a coroner's warrant, Dr. Charhart."

The doctor's eyes blazed as bright as the fire he no doubt longed to be warming himself by.

"Fine—step aside and let me at the old villain!" he snapped, pushing past Bucket before the inspector had time to move. The old man's body was lying in the gutter nearby, and Charhart stomped over and knelt down beside it.

"Do I take it that you knew the gentleman?" Bucket asked.

"Scrooge was no gentleman," the doctor muttered, seeming to take bitter pleasure from turning the corpse over so it was face-down in grimy, soupy snow. "He was a vulture, a scavenger, a carrion-eater. And if you're wondering why a true gentleman like myself would need the piddling extra pounds *per annum* a coroner's warrant offers, then look no further. Scrooge was nearly the ruin of me, and it is a fine Christmas gift indeed to find *his* ruin before me now. If I could take him home and hang him upon my tree, I tell you I would."

Charhart roughly rolled the body in the slush again, as if it were a cut of meat he was breading with flour. He stared down at Scrooge's dead face for a moment, not so much examining the body, it seemed, as pausing to appreciate it. Then he stood and began wiping his hands with a hankie he produced from his pocket.

"I've seen enough," he announced. "I'm going home."

"Surely you're not done already?" Bucket protested.

"Most assuredly I am. Ebenezer Scrooge was trampled to death, and I intend to file a certificate to that effect the day after tomorrow. There remains nothing further to occupy me here."

"Oh, but questions remain, Dr. Charhart. Questions remain," Bucket clucked. "Mr. Scrooge was acting in a most peculiar manner before he was killed. He was euphoric—hysterically so. I spoke with him myself, and were there mistletoe about, I do believe he would have kissed me. I wonder if you detected anything that might account for such uncharacteristic jollity?"



Charhart straightened to his full height, straining for the maximum altitude from which to peer down disdainfully upon the detective. "Exactly what sort of something are you suggesting?"

"Well," Bucket said, and he cleared his throat and leaned in closer, continuing in a conspiratorial whisper. "When I talked to Mr. Scrooge, I noticed upon him the scent of opium smoke."

Charhart responded with a mocking guffaw that he cast down upon Bucket like Zeus hurling a lightning bolt from Olympus.

"You did not!" the doctor cried.

"I did," Bucket responded calmly.

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"No, Dr. Charhart."

"Rubbish!"

"I don't believe so, Dr. Charhart."

"Poppycock! Tommyrot! Fiddle-faddle! Flapdoodle!"

Bucket waited patiently for Charhart to finish.

"If you hadn't been so eager to dunk the body in gutter-wash like a scone in tea, you might have smelled it yourself," the detective said mildly.

"Ebenezer Scrooge took but one pleasure from life, Bucket—the continual accumulation of wealth. To suggest anything to the contrary is purest humbug! Now if you are through insulting me, I will be on my way."

Bucket held up a fat forefinger and pushed it out before him like a candle to light his way. "One final question, Dr. Charhart: As you knew Mr. Scrooge, perhaps you could tell me where I might find his family. After all, we can't leave his body here in the street."

"You can throw it in the Thames for all I care!" Charhart thundered. "As for Scrooge's family, he never spoke of any but for a single nephew—Fred Merriweather. A merchant of some sort. Resides in Pimlico, I believe. And that's the last thing I have to say upon the subject of Ebenezer Scrooge. I would wish you a good night, Bucket, except I don't see why I should wish for you what you've denied me."

Charhart spun on his heel and began striding quickly into the fog.

"Thank you, Dr. Charhart!" Bucket called after him. "A very happy Christmas to you and yours!"

Charhart didn't look back.

"Police Constable Dimm," Bucket said, turning to peer up at the ambulance driver. "Why don't you come down and help Police Constable Thicke get Mr. Scrooge stowed away? It looks like you'll be paying a call in Pimlico before the night's through!"

Dimm, a congenitally lethargic man who could barely muster the necessary vigor needed to continue breathing, began climbing down with such painstaking sluggishness an observer would have been forced to watch him for quite some time to be certain he was moving at all. This suited Bucket just fine, actually, for he had other business to attend to while Dimm and Thicke tidied up the gutter.

The detective walked toward the sign reading SCROOGE & MARLEY and made use of the doorway beneath it. The door was open wide, and gray tendrils of icy fog had swept into the office to curl themselves around desks and chairs like the clutching fingers of some colossal ghost.

Bucket sniffed at the air, hoping to reassure himself that the scent he'd caught on the old man's clothes had been no pipe dream of his own. But it wouldn't have mattered now had Scrooge been smoking two opium pipes while burning incense and boiling cabbage. The odors would have been long dissipated by the flow of air from outside. Indeed, Scrooge's office now smelled like the nearby London streets—which is to say, like factory smoke, horses, and the unwholesome effluvia of a million souls living in close quarter.

His nose finding little to investigate, Bucket turned the job over to his eyes. After giving the rooms before them a thorough examination, they reported back thusly:

❖ *Scrooge employed a solitary clerk, and the old man made no exception from his stinginess to accommodate this underling's comfort.* An empty coal scuttle, overflowing work desk, and high, rickety stool were shoved into one cell-like corner.

❖ *Scrooge was as parsimonious with his trust as he was with his coal.* The ledger books arrayed upon a shelf at the back of the office were shut tight with leather clasps and padlocks.

❖ *Scrooge's tight fist squeezed its owner nearly as hard as it squeezed the rest of humanity.* Scrooge's own work area was only slightly less dismal than the clerk's, and the old man had conducted his affairs by candlelight rather than part with the extra coins necessary for the purchase of lamp oil.

❖ *Scrooge had been "burning the candle at both ends" at the very moment his sanity flickered out.* His aforementioned desk candles had melted completely, leaving tracks of yellow and brown wax slithering across the wood to pool around the edges of an open ledger.

❖ *And finally, Scrooge had most definitely not been smoking opium on the premises.* There was no pipe in sight.

Aside from the streams of wax flowing across the desktop,

Scrooge's office was a perfectly orderly (if exceptionally dark and dingy) place of business, and there was nothing to suggest it doubled as an opium den. Yet, while Bucket could be labeled agnostic on many another matter, his faith in his own senses never wavered. He was one of a new breed: a detective—one who detects. And he had smelled opium on the old man.

So when Dimm stepped inside to announce glumly that the body was ready for "home delivery," Bucket had an announcement of his own to make: He would be accompanying Dimm to the residence of Scrooge's nephew, Fred Merriweather.

"A happy Christmas to you, Police Constable Thicke!" Bucket called out as the ambulance rolled away.

"And to you and the missus, Inspector Bucket!" Thicke replied with a hearty wave. "And to you too, Dimm!"

"Oh yes," Dimm grumbled. "What could be merrier than spending Christmas Eve playing hansom cab for a corpse?"

"Cheer up, Police Constable Dimm! At least you won't spend the night walking a beat like poor Police Constable Thicke back there."

Dimm would have rolled his eyes had he the energy to do so.

"Sure you wouldn't rather ride inside, sir?" he muttered instead. "Warmer."

Bucket shook his head. "From what I understand, the old gentleman would make more congenial company now than ever he did in life. Nevertheless, I prefer to surround myself with more, shall we say, animated companions." The detective paused to glance at Dimm, who sat beside him as hunched and still as a gargoyle, his only movement an occasional flick of the reins he held loosely in his limply hanging hands. "Not that I'm entirely certain you qualify as such, Police Constable Dimm. You seem so uncommonly torpid, even by your own languorous standards, I almost wonder if this ambulance carries two cadavers this evening."

Astronomers training their telescopes upon the blue wool of Dimm's uniform tailcoat might have detected, had they been squinting fiercely enough, a slight tremor about the shoulders that would have entirely evaded the detection of the unaided human eye. This was a shrug.

"Just . . . thinking," Dimm mumbled.

"Ah ha! There's your problem! Constables aren't paid to think—that's what inspectors are for. Just let your mind go blank, and you'll feel better in no time, there's a good fellow."

He gave Dimm a jovial swat on the back, certain he'd solved the younger man's problems, whatever they were. Yet something about Dimm's lugubrious manner made Bucket's forefinger

twitch, as it did whenever there was an itch the detective felt compelled to scratch.

After a moment of silence, Bucket scratched it.

"Besides . . . what have you to think about, Police Constable Dimm?"

Dimm finally showed signs of life, actually cringing when he heard Bucket's question. "No use hiding it, I suppose; it's common enough knowledge amongst the other P.C.'s. The old man had me on the hook for a dozen guineas."

"You owed money to Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge?"

Dimm's chin moved an infinitesimal fraction of an inch closer to his chest—for Dimm, a vigorous nod. "It started out as just a trifle. I got into . . . a tight spot with a woman, and I needed a few extra bob to make things right."

Bucket turned to stare at the ambulance driver, unable to disguise his astonishment. Not that Dimm had become entangled in a usurer's web, mind you. Bucket simply couldn't believe the man was capable of the exertion usually required to put oneself in "a tight spot with a woman."

"I couldn't pay it all back on time—and once you fall behind with Scrooge, there's no hope of catching up again," Dimm continued miserably. "Now that the old blighter's dead, I'm at the mercy of whichever creditor takes over his business. Might be someone even worse than Scrooge himself."

"Ho ho! That hardly seems possible," Bucket said, his voice more blithesome than his thoughts.

Whoever took on the accounts of Scrooge & Marley would be within his rights to call in the firm's chits forthwith. Anyone unable to meet their obligations would land in the workhouse.

"Take heart, Police Constable Dimm."

Bucket clapped his companion on the back again, intending to cheer up his brother officer by pointing out the shining silver lining in the dark cloud above. After a moment's searching, however, Bucket realized there was no such lining to point to: The P.C. was bugged.

"I'll stand you to a drink sometime," the detective said with a sigh, offering a small lining of his own that was, if not silver, worth at least three pence.

After a quick stop at B Division headquarters to inquire as to the residence of one Fred Merriweather of Pimlico, Bucket and Dimm arrived at the home of Scrooge's nephew. It was a pretty if somewhat stucco-heavy townhouse in a long row of pretty if somewhat stucco-heavy townhouses, all of them radiating an aura of respectable *bourgeois* coziness. The Merriweather home,

however, was set apart from its neighbors by the light and laughter that spilled forth from inside—the Merriweathers weren't waiting for Christmas to begin their revelries.

Bucket shook his head sadly. He was a man with a heartfelt appreciation for laughter and high spirits, and he hated to spoil anyone's sport. Yet he had no choice.

The law plainly stated that a body removed from a public street was to be, if possible, transported with all due haste to the family home, where convention dictated that it would lie in state until burial. Which made Bucket feel like Father Christmas in reverse: He was bringing a "gift" that would *ruin* a family's holiday. After all, it's hard to make merry with a cadaver in the corner.

"I tell you, Police Constable Dimm, I wish it were a plump goose and not a flattened uncle we were here to hand over," Bucket said as he climbed down from the ambulance.

"You never know," Dimm murmured. "Scrooge's nephew might welcome the latter more warmly than the former."

Bucket lingered a moment, his forefinger tingling for reasons he couldn't fathom, before turning toward the house.

"Is this the home of Mr. Fred Merriweather?" he asked the girl who answered upon his knocking.

"Yes, sir," the servant replied, casting a nervous glance over Bucket's shoulder at the police ambulance.

"Would you be so kind as to fetch your master? I have news he may wish to hear away from his guests."

The girl gave a quick nod and disappeared inside. A minute later, the door was opened again, this time by a huffing, puffing young man in rumpled clothes. His round, ruddy face was half grin, half frown.

"You must excuse me, sir: We were indulging in a bit of blind-man's bluff," the man panted. "Now, what's this about news for me?"

"Mr. Merriweather, I am Inspector Bucket of the Detective Police, and it is my unfortunate duty to inform you that Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge was this evening killed."

For the first time, Bucket saw someone react to Scrooge's demise with what appeared to be actual sadness.

"My uncle? Dead?" Merriweather swayed so severely he had to clutch the door to steady himself. "How?"

"Run over in the street, Mr. Merriweather. By a wagon. I am sorry."

Merriweather gave a nod almost as weak as one of Dimm's, then slowly pulled himself up straight.

"You've brought the body then?" he said, managing a stronger nod at the ambulance.

"That's right."

Merriweather smiled grimly.

"And it was such a lovely party too," he said wistfully. "I'll send someone out to help your man move the b-body . . ."

The last word seemed to catch in Merriweather's throat, and he had to hack out a cough before he could continue.

" . . . move my *uncle* into the house. In the meantime, why don't you come in and warm yourself, Inspector?"

Bucket offered his thanks, stepping inside and watching from the foyer while Merriweather went to break the news to the dozen or so guests filling his parlor. There were sympathetic groans and somber condolences from all around, yet it seemed to Bucket as if Merriweather's friends were grieving less for old Scrooge than they were for a splendid party cut down in the prime of life. In fact, one young lady wasn't shy about saying as much.

"That's just like your uncle, isn't it? He had to find one last way to spoil your Christmas cheer."

Of course, Bucket knew only one person who could take the liberty of speaking so bluntly: The lady had to be Merriweather's wife. She was gaunt and sunken eyed, yet exceptionally pretty all the same, with long blond hair pinned up with a squarish gold brooch.

"Margaret, please," Merriweather said with reluctant reproach.

"Yes, I know," Mrs. Merriweather replied. "We must show respect for the dead, though, why the act of dying suddenly makes one respectable is beyond me."

The once-gay revelers took to staring down mutely, as if admiring each other's shoes or searching for a lost earring.

"In Scrooge's case, however, perhaps I can understand it," Mrs. Merriweather continued. "Death could only be an improvement to him."

"Margaret, *please*," Merriweather said again. "Let us see to our guests—" His gaze darted in Bucket's direction. "—before we discuss this further."

Mrs. Merriweather glanced at Bucket, then smiled stiffly.

"Of course, you're right, Fred." She turned to address her friends, who were still busying themselves with silent inspections of the carpet. "I'm sorry our evening must end on such a note. I hope we haven't robbed you all of a very merry Christmas."

The parlor emptied quickly, with an almost frenzied hurry to don overcoats and hats before the guest of dishonor could be brought inside. Dimm and a servant appeared bearing a lumpy load on a blanket-covered stretcher just as the last guest made his escape.



"Must you bring that in here?" Merriweather's wife snapped.

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Merriweather," Bucket said. "Your husband is the only relation the gentleman had in town, I gather."

"Or in all the world," Merriweather said with a sigh. "Well . . . wherever shall we put him?"

"The dustbin, perhaps?" Mrs. Merriweather suggested.

Merriweather ignored his wife's bitter jest.

"There's room in the nursery," he mused. "Perhaps we should leave him there until we can arrange for the undertaker to—"

Mrs. Merriweather took a step toward her husband, her eyes suddenly alight with white-hot fury.

"How dare you!" she spat. She whirled to face Dimm and her servant. "You will take the body to the parlor. Have Lucy clear off the table and . . . and . . ."

Mrs. Merriweather spun again and fled down the narrow hallway toward the back of the house, the dainty hands pressed over her face unable to smother the sound of her crying. A door slammed, swallowing her sobs.

"Do as she asks," Merriweather said quietly.

Dimm and the servant trudged away, leaving Bucket and Merriweather alone in the foyer.

"I see that your wife is not immune to grief after all," Bucket said.

Merriweather gaped at him, looking confused.

"She is still wearing a mourning brooch . . . and the nursery is empty," the detective explained. "You have my condolences."

"Thank you. And you're right—the wound runs deep in her," Merriweather replied with a weary nod. "And my uncle . . . well, if you know much of him, you know that he would not be a pillar of strength for us in our time of loss. In fact, he didn't even attend the funeral. Tonight was the first time in ages I've seen Margaret smile without a bottle of laudanum to thank for it. She finally seemed free of her sorrow, if only for a moment. For you to arrive at just that moment with . . ." Merriweather glanced into the parlor, where his young maid was pushing aside a punch bowl and plates of sweets and nuts so Scrooge's wool-draped carcass could be positioned atop the table like the centerpiece of a holiday feast. "Is he . . . presentable?"

"You will have need of all the undertaker's expertise if there is to be a viewing," Bucket answered gently.

Merriweather winced. "And to think I saw him just this afternoon as fit and full of vinegar as ever."

"You saw your uncle today?" Bucket asked, surprised.

"Yes. I visited him at his counting-house."

"For what purpose?"

"For the purpose of wishing him a happy Christmas, of course. And to invite him here tonight."

"Really? I'm surprised Mrs. Merriweather would approve."

"Too often we forget that Christmas is the time of redemption, Inspector," Merriweather chided mildly. "I offered just that to my uncle today, in the spirit of the Christian forgiveness the season requires. He refused it, of course, called Christmas 'humbug,' and sent me on my way. And I'll admit, I was secretly glad he did so, for Margaret's sake. As it is, I didn't even have to tell her I'd been to see him."

Bucket's forefinger began to itch, and he rubbed it absent-mindedly across his chin as he spoke. "Was your uncle alone when you saw him?"

What Bucket really meant was, "Were you alone with your uncle?" Yet he didn't wish to cause offense by giving the impression he had suspicions, which by this time he certainly did.

"His clerk Cratchit was slaving away at his desk, as usual—poor soul," Merriweather replied. "I've often wondered why he would remain in my uncle's employ for so long. He seems a fine enough fellow, and it's hard to imagine a more miserly master than Ebenezer Scrooge."

"Would you happen to know where this Mr. Cratchit lives? I should like to speak with him. A mere formality, you understand. The coroner is a terrible fussbudget. If I don't have each *i* dotted and every *t* crossed—twice, mind you, just to be doubly certain the job gets done—old Inspector Bucket will be back in constables' blue in a trice."

"We can't have that," Merriweather said with a small smile. "I recall Cratchit mentioning once that he'd taken his children sledding on Primrose Hill. So were I 'old Inspector Bucket,' I suppose I'd start looking for him in Camden Town."

"You have the makings of a fine detective, Mr. Merriweather," Bucket replied, nodding his approval. "Thank you for your assistance, and from here on may the season bring you and your wife only the rewards you so richly deserve."

After collecting Dimm from the parlor (where the constable had somehow marshaled the energy to pocket large quantities of sweetmeats while wooing the maid with a steady stream of mumbled blandishments), Bucket took his leave of the Merriweather residence.

"Why don't you stretch yourself out down below and have a rest now that there's no company to crowd you?" Dimm suggested, as he slowly hoisted himself back into the driver's seat. "I can drop

you at your house on my way back to E Division."

"Most thoughtful of you," Bucket said, hauling himself up next to the constable. "Only you're not headed back to E Division yet. You're taking me to Y Division."

"Y Division, sir?" Dimm blurted, suddenly looking very much awake.

"That's right, Police Constable Dimm. Y Division. I intend to find Mr. Bob Cratchit of Camden Town, and I intend to find him tonight."

And find him he did, thanks to two sleepy station-house sergeants who, between them, knew every man, woman, child, cat, and cockroach in North London.

"Cricket?" mused the first sergeant.

"Cratchit," said the second sergeant. "Bill."

"Bob," the first corrected.

"Bob," the second conceded. "Tall bloke."

First shook his head. "Short."

Second wagged his hand. "More . . . medium."

"Very medium, he is," First agreed. "Lives on Jamestown Road."

"Noooo," Second yawned. "Bayham Street."

"Bayham Street it is," First seconded. "Big flat, lots of kids."

"Medium flat . . . big kids?" Second said, sounding uncertain.

First: "Hold on. Small flat, no kids."

Second: "Now you've got it. Small flat, no kids."

Third: "Wait!"

"Third" was, in fact, Inspector Bucket.

"Mr. Cratchit has no children?" he said, his bushy brows knit together so firmly they looked like a pair of amorous caterpillars stealing a kiss beneath the mistletoe.

The two sergeants nodded, finally in complete agreement.

Bucket's forefinger began itching like a fleabite on a boil on a rash on a bum in woolen underpants two sizes too small. It itched very badly indeed.

Twenty minutes later, said finger was curled into a fist, knocking on the rather shabby-looking door of Bob Cratchit's flat. The "very medium" man who answered was rather shabby looking himself, being attired in an unraveling sweater and tattered, fingerless gloves.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Bob Cratchit?"

"Yes?"

"I am Inspector Bucket of the Detective Police. I need to have a word with you about Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge."

Cratchit flinched at the very mention of his employer. "Scrooge? What of him?"

"He is dead."

Cratchit's lips began to tremble, and his eyes took on the shimmery shine of tears barely kept in check. "No. Surely not."

"I'm afraid so. May I come inside, Mr. Cratchit?"

Cratchit nodded mutely, backing away from the door to let the detective into his dark, dingy, drafty room.

"You were fond of the old gentleman then?" Bucket asked as Cratchit dropped into a rickety chair that barely looked like it could support its own weight, let alone that of a man, "very medium" or otherwise.

The clerk looked bewildered. "Fond? You . . . you think I'm . . . ? Oh." He took in a deep breath, then shook his head sadly. "You give me too much credit, Inspector. I feel no sorrow for Scrooge. I feel sorry for myself."

"For yourself? Why?"

Cratchit ran his fingers through his fair, thinning hair. "Because I'm headed to the poorhouse, that's why! How long will it take a man like me to find a new position? A week? Two weeks? A month? Yet I don't have enough in my pocket to last till New Year's!" He stared down at the stained, scuffed floorboards. "Oh, what a merry Christmas *this* is!"

"There, there, Mr. Cratchit. I'm sure it's not as bad as all that," Bucket said. "A man with the pertinacity to work for the infamous Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge should find a new and infinitely more agreeable master soon enough. 'Why, here comes Bob Cratchit!' men will say. 'If he can last all those years with old Scrooge, surely he can do anything!'" Bucket brought up his forefinger and tapped it against his thick lips. "By the by, how long *did* you work for Mr. Scrooge?"

Cratchit said simply, "Four years." His bitter tone added a bit more color, however. "Four sodding miserable bloody years," it said.

"And what were your duties, Mr. Cratchit?"

"Filing, double-checking sums, copying letters—the usual for a clerk. Though I didn't receive the usual clerk's wages, I can assure you."

Bucket glanced around at Cratchit's squalid flat, with its ramshackle furnishings, peeling wallpaper, and trails of multicolored wax drippings crisscrossing the floor.

"Apparently not," he said. "Which leads me to wonder why you didn't seek greener pastures, if Mr. Scrooge's were so barren."

Cratchit looked aghast, as if Bucket had spoken some heresy. "Oh, but I couldn't! Scrooge was horribly vindictive! If he'd learned I was inquiring about employment elsewhere, he would've sacked me on the spot!"

"I see. Tell me, Mr. Cratchit, what sort of mood was your vindictive master in today?"

"A most peculiar one, now that you mention it. He actually wished me a merry Christmas and let me go early!"

"And you noticed nothing else unusual?"

Cratchit chewed his lower lip and rolled his eyes, looking like a schoolboy called upon to recite the alphabet who loses his way after j. "No. Nothing else."

"Did you ever know Mr. Scrooge to partake of strong drink or . . . other indulgences?"

"Scrooge indulged in nothing save merciless shylocking and the occasional butter crumpet. Why do you ask?"

Bucket described the daft antics that had climaxed in the old man's death. Cratchit listened with a dismay that slowly grew into open-mouthed horror.

"I . . . I can't believe it."

"I ask again, Mr. Cratchit, you're certain you noticed nothing else out of the ordinary?"

"Well, I did hear Scrooge muttering to himself all afternoon. More than usual, I mean. He often mumbled when he was going over the books. But today, his conversations with himself were a touch more spirited than most days."

"Was this before or after Scrooge's nephew paid him a call?"

"Scrooge's nephew?" Cratchit's eyes popped wide, then narrowed quickly, and the clerk took a moment to gnaw on a fingernail before giving a single, firm nod. "After. Yes. Definitely after."

"Did they meet in Mr. Scrooge's office—out of your sight?"

"Indeed, they did."

"And how long were Mr. Merriweather and his uncle alone?"

"A few minutes, I suppose."

"Ah. Tell me, Mr. Cratchit—"

Cratchit had not yet done Bucket the courtesy of offering him a seat, and the detective finally decided to take matters into his own hands (or, to be more exact, onto his own posterior). He stepped to a nearby chair and lowered himself down upon it, then immediately hopped back up when the wood beneath him groaned alarmingly.

"Tell me, Mr. Cratchit," Bucket began again, "what is your opinion of Mr. Merriweather?"

Cratchit shrugged. "He seems nice enough . . . maybe a little *too* nice. Has a tinge of brown about the nose, if you know what I mean, sir. Always wearing a smile—wearing it like a mask, I sometimes think. Just look at him and his uncle. He put up with all sorts of humbuggery from the man. And for what? So he could

come around the next holiday and collect more? I think not."

"You suspect a hidden motive?"

Cratchit winked and pressed a finger against his nose. "How hidden is it when you're an old, rich man's only living relation? He wanted to stay in Scrooge's good graces . . . as much as anyone could stay in what little grace Scrooge possessed. And the two of them would quarrel."

"Over what, pray?"

"Well, for one thing, Scrooge wasn't keen on Merriweather's chosen trade: some kind of imports from the East, I gathered. 'One sunk ship and your ship is sunk,' I heard the old man say. 'Lending, on the other hand, will keep a smart businessman afloat for life.'"

"Imports from the East, eh?" Bucket mused, so lost in thought he began to settle onto the flimsy wooden chair again. Its squeak of warning sent him hopping back onto his feet. "One final question, Mr. Cratchit: Do you have any children?"

Cratchit blinked at the detective, looking almost dazed. After a moment, his lips took to quivering and his eyes to misting.

"I don't know why you ask, sir . . . but . . . I do have children, yes. And prettier little angels you've never seen. But their mother . . . she up and took 'em to her father's in Brixton. 'I love you, Bob Cratchit,' she said, 'but love won't feed our children.'"

"I see," Bucket said, with gentle sympathy. "Well. I'm sure I've taken up enough of your time this evening. I'll bid you a merry Christmas and be on my way."

"If by some miracle this is a merry Christmas, it will be my last," Cratchit moaned, wringing his hands. "I can't imagine much merriness in debtor's prison."

"Now, now, Mr. Cratchit—" Bucket began, sidling toward the door.

"The carolers may be singing of glad tidings for man, but the tidings for *this* man couldn't be more woeful," Cratchit continued, staring up at Bucket with wide, round, red eyes. "I hear no Christmas carols, sir. I hear dirges."

"Now, n—," Bucket tried again.

"Alas," Cratchit broke in, "it's a blessing after all that there will be no loving family gathered 'round me come Christmas morning. For how could I keep them from starving when I can't even keep my own stomach full? Why, I haven't even the money to buy a single hot cross bun!"

And at last Bucket understood: He could not exit Cratchit's chambers without first paying the toll.

"You've been very helpful, Mr. Cratchit." Bucket scooped a few



pennies, farthings, and half-farthings from his vest pocket and handed them to the clerk. "Allow me—in the spirit of the holiday."

"Thank you, Inspector." Cratchit eyed the small bulge that remained in Bucket's pocket, his hand still outstretched. "This should stave off starvation till Boxing Day, at least. As for my little ones . . . well, I still can't so much as send them a lump of coal, but perhaps the warmth of their poor mother's love will be enough to keep them from freezing."

Bucket sighed, dug in his finger again, and produced a sixpence. It landed atop the other coins in Cratchit's palm with a hard, cold *clink*.

"Bless you," Cratchit said, pocketing the coins with a nod that let Bucket know he'd finally been dismissed.

The detective scurried out the door before Cratchit could change his mind and begin wheedling again. The man was so good at it, Bucket was afraid he'd leave the flat with nothing but the clothes on his back—if that.

"Where to now, Inspector?" Dimm grumbled, as Bucket climbed back atop the ambulance with him.

A light snow had been falling, yet the constable was too lethargic to brush any of the accumulation from his coat, and he was dusted in white from top to bottom. It looked as if pranksters had left the wagon reins in the hands of a snowman.

"One last stop, then you're through playing hansom driver, Police Constable Dimm."

"And where might we be going now?" Dimm asked suspiciously. "Z Division? Or do you need to interview someone in Aberdeen, perhaps?"

"Not nearly so far," Bucket replied cheerfully. Though he'd be leaving Camden Town more than half a shilling lighter than he'd entered it, he was in far too good a mood to let Dimm's insolence provoke him. "Bloomsbury will do, 126 Southhampton Row. The Bucket residence."

It was a long, cold ride south to Bloomsbury, but Bucket barely felt the chill. He was warmed by thoughts of the pipe, slippers, sherry, poultry, and pudding that awaited him—not to mention the genial Mrs. Bucket. He was warmed, too, by the glow of self-satisfaction.

The Mystery of Ebenezer Scrooge had proved to be no mystery at all.

After sending Dimm on his way with spirited holiday well wishes (which the constable acknowledged with a *dispirited* shrug), Bucket stepped inside his cramped-but-comfortable home to find his usually imperturbable wife flushed and panting.

"Oh, William!" Mrs. Bucket exclaimed, throwing her plump arms around him. "When I saw that ambulance out front, I didn't know what to think!"

"There, there, my pet," Bucket said, comforting her with a squeeze and a peck on the cheek. "I'm sorry for the fright. I should've had Police Constable Dimm drop me at the corner. As you can see, there's nothing wrong with me a hot supper and a cuddle by the fire won't cure."

Though the Buckets occasionally took in lodgers, they had none now, so the mister felt free to give the missus a playful swat on the behind as he disentangled himself from her arms and headed for the kitchen.

"If you think you're getting out of trouble that easily after coming home three hours late on Christmas Eve . . ." Mrs. Bucket mock-scolded, her fists perched on her wide hips.

"Late?" Bucket dipped his forefinger into a pot of thick, brown gravy. "Oh no—I'm early! Just look on the mantelpiece if you don't believe me."

While the inspector loaded a plate with the roast duck, stuffing, and pudding he found warming in the oven, his wife went to the drawing room and searched the mantel. Tucked away behind a portrait of Sir Robert Peel she found a small black book bound with red ribbon: *Tales* by Edgar Allan Poe. Eyes gleaming, Mrs. Bucket ripped the ribbon free and practically hurled herself into the nearest chair. By the time her husband joined her in the drawing room, his round belly all the rounder for the two heaping plates of food he'd just consumed, she'd already raced through "The Gold-Bug" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," and was plunging headlong into "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Bucket knew it was useless to attempt to engage her in conversation until she'd finished, so he settled back into a chair of his own, propped his feet up before the fireplace, lit his pipe, and waited.

A few minutes later, his wife heaved a contented sigh, closed her book, and looked up at Bucket with a smile.

"Thank you, William," she said. "So . . . now you can tell me *your* mystery story."

Bucket grinned back at her. There'd been no need to tell her what had kept him late. It had to be a case, and a particularly interesting one to boot. And, as with all such cases, Mrs. Bucket would want a full accounting from her husband—as well as the opportunity to test her own observations and inferences against his. And Bucket was happy to oblige her, for he'd found that his wife's conjectures stocked a far greater store of logic and insight than those of his colleagues.

And so he told her the tale. Mrs. Bucket sat rapt throughout, not speaking a word for nearly a quarter of an hour. She merely cocked an eyebrow or murmured the occasional "hmmm" until Bucket clapped his hands together and said, "And then I came home to find my dear wife on the verge of fainting! So? What do you make of it all?"

Something about the quizzical look in his wife's eyes tickled Bucket's forefinger like a feather.

"Why do I get the feeling, William, that you are on the verge of making an arrest?"

"Because you're a deucedly clever woman, and because I am on the verge of making an arrest!"

"But . . . who?"

"Why, the nephew, of course!"

"Mr. Merriweather?" Mrs. Bucket shook her head. "He sounds like such a nice, jovial man."

"So he seems," Bucket said, the tickle in his finger deepening into a disconcerting prickling. "But consider this, my plum: Mr. Fred Merriweather is the only person in the world who stands to gain by the death of Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge. The old man was hostile to the very notion of altruism . . . except when under the influence of opium. So it's unlikely that Mr. Scrooge would bequeath his holdings to the church or some charitable society. And those who had cause to hate Mr. Scrooge the most—the many men in his debt—had the most to lose from his death, since their chits might simply be handed over to an even more rapacious creditor."

Bucket paused to gauge how his reasoning was being received. His forefinger didn't like what his eyes reported: Mrs. Bucket's mouth had developed an infinitesimal tilt, one corner of her full lips curling ever so slightly upward.

It didn't bode well. Yet Bucket forged on.

"Second, consider the death of Mr. Merriweather's child. Not only would this deepen Mr. Merriweather's antipathy for his uncle—Mr. Scrooge didn't attend the funeral, you'll recall—but it could have created another motive for murder, as well. Even after the spirit departs, the bills remain. A long illness, a burial, a year in mourning dress—it all costs money. In fact, death is such an expensive proposition these days, I daresay most of us can't afford it! Yet when it comes time to pay the ferryman, we can't refuse, and those we leave behind must settle the tab. It's made paupers of more than one prosperous family. Perhaps Mr. Merriweather found it necessary to, shall we say, accelerate the scheduling of his inheritance."

Bucket's forefinger was itching *and* sweating now, for Mrs.

Bucket's smile had grown wider. But the finger had one more card up its sleeve, so to speak.

"Third, consider the smell of opium smoke I detected upon Mr. Scrooge—and remember that Mr. Merriweather specializes in 'imports from the East.' Surely, a businessman with dealings in the Orient might easily develop connections with the China opium trade or the poppy fields of Afghanistan. And for what purpose did Mr. Merriweather visit his uncle's offices today? To offer 'Christian forgiveness' by inviting Mr. Scrooge to a holiday party hosted by a grief-stricken woman who openly loathes him? That's offering an olive branch with a bee's nest attached, wouldn't you say? Yet it gave Mr. Merriweather an excuse to be alone with his uncle for a few minutes . . . and that was all the time he needed to set his fiendish plot into motion."

Bucket leaned back in his chair and put his pipe to his lips for a triumphant puff—and only noticed then that there was no puff to be had, the tobacco's low flicker of fire having long since snuffed out.

Mrs. Bucket's smile, on the other hand, had been kindled into full flame.

"I'm curious, William," Mrs. Bucket said. "By what means did Mr. Merriweather 'set his fiendish plot into motion'?"

Bucket's forefinger rubbed the cold curve of his pipe-bowl, as if it might relight the tobacco within through sheer friction. Blast her—and bless her—his wife had found the hole in his case, as she always did when there was a hole to be found.

"You mean how did he administer the opium to his uncle?" he said. "That I shall discover when I return to Mr. Merriweather's home after Christmas with a search warrant."

"I see," Mrs. Bucket said, in a way that suggested she *saw* much more than her husband.

"Perhaps you have another question, Mrs. Bucket?" the inspector said somewhat snippishly. As much as he appreciated his wife's insights in hindsight, he found it hard to suppress his vexation upon their initial delivery.

"I do," Mrs. Bucket replied gently. "I wonder why you assign such importance to Merriweather's access to opium via trade connections when it's so readily available through alternate means. Might a *doctor* not have a sample amongst his supplies? Wouldn't someone who had access to, let's say, the medical kit in a *police ambulance* be able to make off with some variant, such as morphine? And, my goodness—you won't find a more popular bottled remedy than *laudanum*, and it's little more than opium sweetened with sugar."

For the full length of a minute, Bucket made no reply. His wife hadn't just pointed out a hole. She'd pointed out that his theory about Merriweather was nothing but hole.

"What you say is true," he finally admitted. "But even if this hypothetical doctor or ambulance driver or laudanum user had equal access to opium, you must admit that none would have as potent a motivation for using it."

"Well," Mrs. Bucket said, shrugging in a way that indicated she would admit no such thing, "I find it rather hard to understand why anyone would want to use it on Scrooge."

"What?" Bucket blurted. "Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge was probably the most hated man in London!"

Mrs. Bucket nodded calmly.

"Yes, he was," she conceded. "So if he had been murdered, I should think you would have a city full of suspects to sort through. But, William, Scrooge *wasn't* murdered, was he? He ran into the street and was trampled by a passing wagon. His death was an accident."

"How can you say that? The opium—!"

"Would have made a poor murder weapon. If Scrooge's death had been the objective, surely arsenic would have made a better choice. Or any of a hundred other poisons."

"But . . ." Bucket began, his forefinger poised to give his arguments renewed life through vigorous pointing and wagging. The finger quickly went limp, however, and the rest of the detective followed suit, settling back into his chair with a defeated sigh.

"You're right," he said. "I'm a fool."

Mrs. Bucket reached over and gave her brooding husband a brisk (but not too forceful) swat on the arm.

"What a thing for Inspector William Bucket to say!" she chided. "The man who unmasked the killer of Theophilus Tulkinghorn and rescued Edwin Drood from the clutches of the devious Canon Crisparkle? The man who engineered the capture of Reginald Compeyson and Tom Gradgrind? The man who pulled the secret strings that sent the fiends Orlick and Fagin to the gallows? The man who married me? A fool? I think not! You've simply been asking yourself the wrong questions tonight, that's all. Set your mind to the right ones, and we'll soon see who's a fool!"

"Well, perhaps," Bucket muttered. He pushed himself deeper into the cushions enveloping his broad undercarriage and tried to revive his fatigued and dejected forefinger by rubbing it across his chin(s). "So 'the right questions' would be . . ."

"Who would have preferred to see old Scrooge drugged rather than dead, and why?" his wife finished for him.

"Ahhhh . . ."

The detective bolted to his feet with his arm upraised and his forefinger pointed skyward, as if he were a puppet hoisted aloft by a string tied to his finger.

"Ah ha!"

"Ah ha?" Mrs. Bucket asked innocently.

The inspector dashed to the coatrack in the foyer and began pulling on his overcoat and boots. "I've no time to explain—and no need, I'll warrant! By Jove, if Scotland Yard knew about you, half the force would be in blue skirts and bonnets inside a week. You ladies might not be as swift with a truncheon as us brutes, but you can be just as swift with a deduction, if given half a chance." Bucket affixed his hat upon his head and threw open the door. "But enough of my babblings! If there ever was any time to lose, I've misplaced it already!"

"Be careful, William!" Mrs. Bucket called, as her husband rushed outside in such a hurry he didn't even close the door behind him.

"If duty permits, my pet!" he shouted, without looking back. "If duty permits!"

Bucket spent the next seven minutes hustling up and down the streets of Bloomsbury looking for a hansom cab, all the while mumbling self-recriminations so acidic they nearly melted the snow beneath his flying feet. Even after he finally found a free cab, Bucket's anxious, murmured curses continued throughout his ride, only coming to an end when he hopped out, collared a shivering street waif, and sent the lad running to the Bow Street station house with a shiny new three-penny in his pocket. (Scrooge's clerk Cratchit had confiscated all the detective's smaller coins.)

The urchin had already dashed off, disappearing into the fog and snow swirling around the gaslights, when Bucket realized exactly how much rested on his messenger's honesty and speed. Looking across the street at his destination—the offices of Scrooge & Marley—Bucket beheld a dim light flickering behind the thin curtains in the window.

The inspector had arrived just in time to confront the culprit. But he would have to do so alone.

The hustle and bustle of the neighborhood had long given way to the eerie stillness of a late winter's night. Nevertheless, Bucket paused to look both ways before hurrying across the street. He was, after all, at the very spot where Scrooge had been crushed like a mouse in a nutcracker hours before.

When he reached the office door, Bucket opened it slowly, dreading the shrieking squeak of rusty hinges that would alert his quarry. But the squeak never came, and Bucket crept inside. He



took ginger, hesitant steps, mindful of the floorboards and the not-insubstantial strain his bulk placed upon them. He turned, closed the door, then pushed on into the darkness.

A low, fluttering glow spilled out from a room at the back of the office. As Bucket inched toward the source of the light—candles atop Scrooge's own desk, he was certain—he passed Cratchit's cramped work nook. Resting on the clerk's precarious perch of a desk were an unused candle and a box of lucifer matches. The detective picked them up and brought them to the ready as he crept forward.

He paused just outside Scrooge's sanctum, listening to a low, scratchy noise from around the corner: a pen moving across paper. Then he struck the match, lit the candle, and stepped into the room.

"Working late, are we?"

The detective's theatrical entrance had the desired effect. The man seated at Scrooge's desk jumped to his feet, popeyed with fright.

"Oh . . . it's you, Inspector," Bob Cratchit said. He eased himself back down into Scrooge's seat with a smile that looked as out of place on his sallow face as jingle bells on a crocodile. "You gave me quite a scare! Yes . . . yes, I am working late. There were a few things that needed to be put in order before Scrooge's accounts are handed over to whoever—"

"What sort of things?" Bucket cut in. He nodded at the ledger spread out before Cratchit. It was the same wax-splattered account book the detective had seen there when he'd made his search of the office hours before. "From the lock on that ledger-book, I'd guess Mr. Scrooge intended that only *he* should make changes to the balances inside."

"Well, yes, you're right." Cratchit's grin began to flicker like the candlelight that barely illuminated the room. "But Scrooge fell behind on the bookkeeping. There were changes he never got around to writing down."

"Payments, I assume?"

Cratchit's smile finally snuffed out completely.

"Yes . . . payments," the clerk said, his gaze dropping to the fresh ink that still glistened on the ledgerbook's pages. When he looked back up again, his eyes were wild with fear and remorse. "You must believe me, Inspector, I—!"

Bucket silenced him with a clucked *tut-tut* and a waggle of his upraised forefinger. "You don't have to explain. I know you didn't mean to harm Mr. Scrooge—at least not in the physical sense. You merely hoped to inflict a few small wounds upon his pocketbook

through some surreptitious . . . editing, shall we say? Your duties have included copying Mr. Scrooge's letters, so you've had ample opportunity to master the forging of his handwriting. But getting access to his ledgers proved a thornier problem. Mr. Scrooge kept them under lock and key. So you planned to make the changes while he was in an opium-induced stupor. You could tell him afterwards that he suffered from some kind of episode—an excuse you could also use if he ever questioned your changes. 'Don't you remember, sir? Mr. Smith paid us in full the day you had your spell.' And so on. I assume you were to be rewarded for your trouble. A percentage of the debts you erased, perhaps?"

As he unspooled his deductions, Bucket was overcome by a growing sense of triumph that flew past smugness all the way to euphoria. Not only did his forefinger tingle with a barely contained elation, his entire body seemed to throb with pleasure. The feeling grew so powerful, in fact, that the detective found it difficult to continue speaking.

"But something went wrong . . . didn't it, Mr. Scratchit? I don't know how you madministered the yummyop . . . administered the opium, but it didn't effect Mr. Plan as you'd scrooged. Mr. Spoon as you'd praged. Memar Scroo ash oo glanged."

Bucket put his free hand to his forehead and took a deep breath. Three separate sensations were trying to crowd their way into his brain all at once, and the only way he could accommodate them was to have them form a line and enter one at a time.

The first came by way of his ears, which sent word that a sound not unlike giggling was escaping from his own lips.

The second had been sent by his nose, which wished to inform him that an overpowering odor of opium smoke had been detected very close nearby.

The third came from his eyes.

"Master Bucket," they were trying to tell him. "Please note that Mr. Cratchit is grinning again, and a most malevolent grin it is."

By the time this last report reached his consciousness, however, Bucket found that Cratchit had disappeared entirely, replaced somehow by a remarkably large and malicious-looking gingerbread man.

"You're right, Inspector," the menacing pastry said. "I'd assumed the opium would render Scrooge unconscious, or at least malleable. Instead, he became agitated, convinced ghosts were tormenting him, and he ran babbling out of the office. With the old man causing a commotion out front, I could hardly take the time to sit here altering the books as I pleased. So I slipped away, planning to return the next workday and act as though nothing had

happened. You can imagine my surprise—if not sorrow—when you showed up to inform me that Scrooge had gotten himself killed. Fortunately, you graced me with enough coin to pay for a quick cab back here so I could finish my work tonight.”

As he spoke, the gingerbread man turned black around the edges, as if he'd been left in the oven too long. The scorched dough grew fuzzy, then became fur, and Cratchit was again transformed, this time into a deer. But no ordinary deer—a reindeer with blood-stained antlers and a nose that blazed as red as the unholy fires of Hell.

“As for the how of it, you hold the answer in your hand,” the reindeer said. “Candles with opium suffused into the wick and wax, placed on Scrooge’s desk. I got the idea from an Edgar Allan Poe story, ‘The Imp of the Perverse.’ I was actually rather surprised to find that it worked. How fortunate for me that a moment ago you should pick up and light one of my spares.”

The deer rose from his seat and started around the desk. The walls behind him writhed and shifted, coalescing into a sinister tableau of glowering, green-haired ogres with termites in their smiles, and the detective barely even noticed the object, long, shiny, and sharp, clutched somehow in the reindeer’s hooves.

“Quite effective up close, isn’t it?” the reindeer said. “And quite pleasurable, if you give yourself over to it. Which I do frequently, being an opium eater myself. That’s how I originally fell into Scrooge’s debt and his servitude. I’ve virtually been the man’s slave for four years. I begged him to release me from my debt, or at least pay me a fair wage so I could have some hope of paying the debt down. I even filled his ears with heartbreaking tales of a desperate wife, a starving family, a crippled son. All rubbish, by the way. My wife ran off years ago, and I’ve never been cursed with a brat that can prove its right to call me ‘father.’ But even if Scrooge believed my lies—and I’ve no idea if he did or didn’t—it wouldn’t have mattered to him. As long as he owned my debt, he owned me.”

The deer drew ever closer, but Bucket was finding it harder and harder to glean meaning from the animal’s words.

“The only way for me to free myself was to free some of Scrooge’s other victims . . . for a fee,” the reindeer said. “I had to flu-fluba my life back. And now that I’ve tartinka gardinka death on my head, I have no reason not to bells bailey drummer-boy petals. I’m sorry, Inspector. I find I must bing bumble zuzu dentist. Dolly Madison? Mommy’s little piggy.”

The reindeer said more, but the words weren’t even sounds to Bucket any longer; they were globules of mulled cider, dark and

steaming hot, that hovered in the air before Bucket's eyes. Bucket giggled again and brought his forefinger up to touch one of the quivering brown spheres.

"Curious," the forefinger said. "There's nothing there."

The reindeer came to a stop before Bucket and raised one of its hooves, the one holding the shiny object.

A candy cane shimmering with sugar.

No, a beautiful crystalline icicle.

"No, no!" Bucket's forefinger screamed. "That's a letter opener! Sharp! Pointy! Bloody hell!"

As the rest of the detective was still far too woozy to react, the finger had to take matters in hand itself—by shooting out and jabbing the reindeer in the eye.

"Argh! Kissed by a dog!" the reindeer yelped (or seemed to in Bucket's still-scrambled mind). Except it wasn't a reindeer anymore. It had turned back into Cratchit, and he was bringing up the letter opener again with a roar of rage, ready to plunge the sharp metal into the detective's throat.

Even with a brain broiled in opium, Bucket knew a poke in the eye wouldn't be enough to save him now. So he used the only weapon he had—the candle he still clutched in his left hand.

He rammed it as hard as he could into Cratchit's face. He was in no condition to aim his thrust, so it was pure accident that most of the candle ended up in the clerk's mouth.

Bucket couldn't be sure if he actually heard the sizzling of hot wax at the back of Cratchit's throat or if the sound was merely another product of his overstoked imagination. The man's scream, on the other hand, was indisputably real. Cratchit flailed out with the letter opener, catching Bucket on the side of the head with more fist than metal, and ran gurgling from the room.

One of the few benefits of being dosed with opium without one's knowledge is the pleasant glow it can impart to the unpleasant consequences. Which is why, when Bucket toppled to the floor, he flattened his nose with a smile, for he dreamed he was being gathered into the warm folds of Mrs. Bucket's ample bosom.

When he awoke a short time later, he was disappointed to find himself not nestled between pillows of soft flesh but staring into the bearded face of a bitterly scowling man.

"What is my name?" the man snapped.

"You . . . are . . . Dr. Charhart," Bucket answered, the words coming with difficulty. "Have you forgotten?"

"Just checking to see if the blow you took knocked any sense into you. It didn't."

The doctor stood and stalked away, and it slowly dawned on

Bucket where he was—flat on his back outside the offices of Scrooge & Marley.

"Don't mind him. He got dragged out of his bed this time, and he ain't happy about it." The large, lumpy form of Constable Thicke loomed over Bucket. "Need a hand up, sir?"

"Yes, that would . . . gad!" Bucket sat bolt upright and grew so dizzy he nearly passed out again. "Cratchit! He's gotten away!"

Thicke steadied the inspector with a hand on his shoulder. "Not to worry, sir: If you mean the gent with the candle in his mouth, we got him. Went tearing down the street just as we arrived, and I didn't have to be a detective like yourself to figure out we should give chase. Fast on his feet, he was, and I reckon he would've gotten away if he hadn't gone all queer all of sudden. Stopped dead in his tracks in front of a snowman and started screaming that the thing was alive. Had on a magic hat, he said. Or at least that's what it sounded like. It's hard to understand him. His mouth's still all waxy-like." Thicke shook his head in weary wonderment. "You do see some interesting things when you put on the blue, don't you, sir? Anyway, we found you inside looking 'bout ready to give up the ghost, so I sent one of the lads off to fetch Dr. Charhart, and there you have it."

"Well, as you can see, I have my ghost fully in check, Police Constable Thicke." Bucket drew in a deep lungful of air. It was cold and rank with the smells of the city, but it swept through his brain like a broom clearing out cobwebs. "Not that I believe in ghosts, of course."

"His eyes!" a hoarse, tortured voice shrieked.

Bucket and Thicke turned to see Constable Dimm and another officer dragging Cratchit to the police ambulance.

"His horrible, horrible eyes!" Cratchit sobbed, struggling feebly as the constables shoved him in the back and padlocked the door. "Eyes made out of coal!"

"I must admit," Thicke said to Bucket, "I'm looking forward to reading your report."

"I daresay it will make even the works of Mr. Edgar Allan Poe seem almost mundane in comparison." Bucket slowly drew himself to his feet and began dusting himself off. "But it's a story you'll have to wait for, as will everyone at E Division. Only the good Mrs. Bucket will be graced with my tale tonight. She won't let me sleep till it's all told, and what's more, she's earned the right to hear it first. They can hold Mr. Cratchit for assaulting an officer for now. I'll write up the rest tomorrow." The detective popped his top hat onto his head. "I'm going home."

"Are you sure you're up for that, sir?"

"I'll be fine."

Bucket turned toward the ambulance. Dimm was watching him sullenly, awaiting the fate he knew he couldn't escape.

"Police Constable Dimm won't mind making a little side trip to Bloomsbury on his way to headquarters. Isn't that right, Police Constable Dimm?"

Dimm didn't say whether he minded or not, though his growl might've been considered an answer by some.

Once again, Bucket rode up top with the constable. He found the frigid slap of the wind against his face refreshing, and the opium fog that had nearly smothered his mind dispersed more with each passing gaslight. His head ached, his nose was tender and bruised, his forefinger throbbed from overuse, and he'd been subjected to fantastical, horrific visions that might scar the psyche of another man.

And Bucket was cheerful.

He knew his head would clear, his nose would heal, his forefinger would be rested and ready for the chase soon enough. He put no stock in phantasms, and the disturbing visions he'd seen held no power over him now.

His good spirits came from what he knew to be real: a bottle of sherry, a bowl of nuts, a pipe, a most excellent partner, all waiting just for him. He would stay up enjoying them until the clock struck twelve—and beyond. 🐦

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# DAUPHIN ISLAND

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L. A. WILSON

**D**aniél Thomas Kane had more on his mind than the storm. Storms came and went. They had hit the island before and, in all probability, would hit it again. The island had survived for hundreds of years and would survive this storm as well.

He watched the swirling dark clouds with curiosity but without apprehension as he guided his car down the darkened street toward the Greenwood Motel.

Adrienne was like a storm. She had roared into his life, disrupting the order to which he had become accustomed. She blew away his strengths and his controls. Now, like her husband, he was simply trying to hold on and doing a bad job of it.

She was sitting on the bed barefoot, with her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. She stared at the images on the television and didn't look up as he entered the room.

"They say we may have to leave the island. What do you think?" she asked.

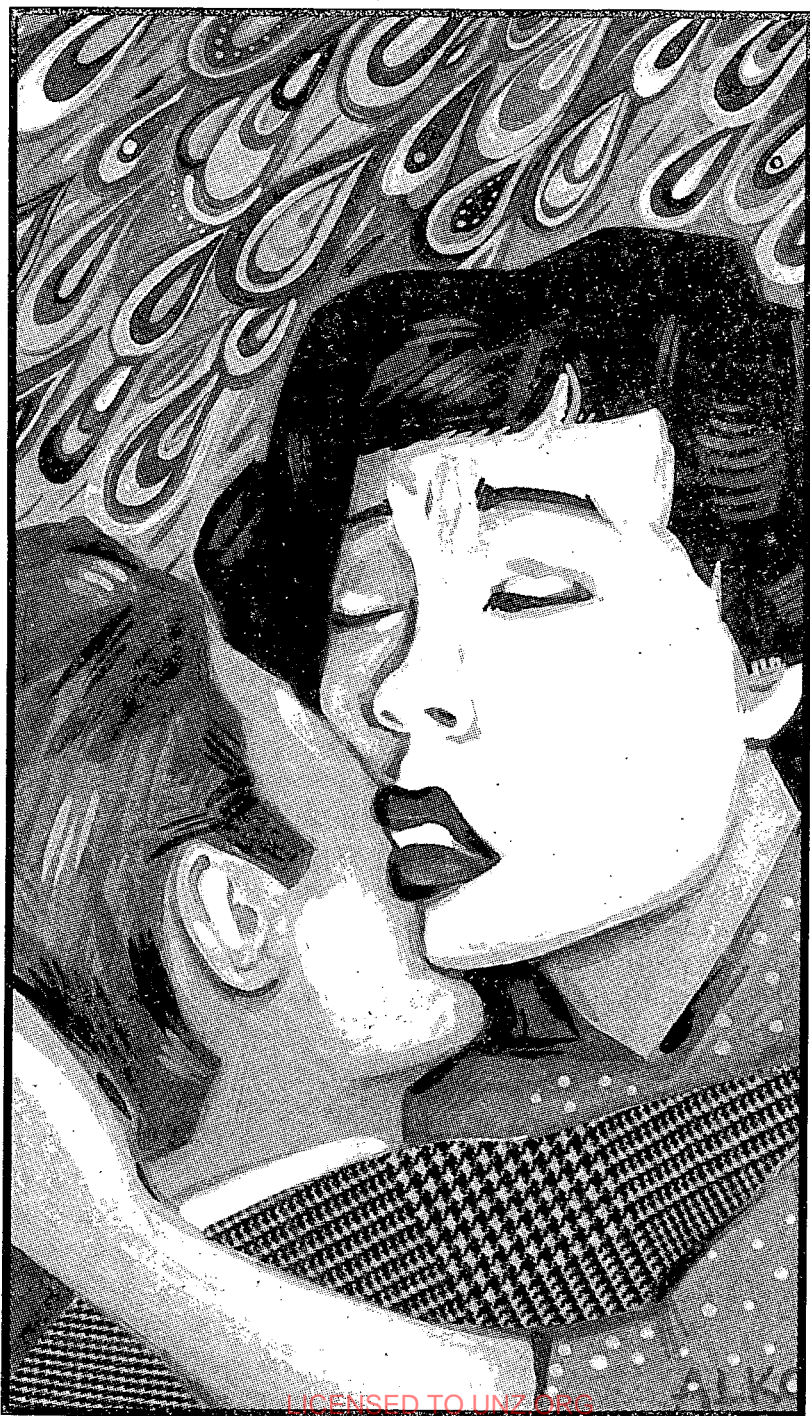
"I've seen worse. The storm is still days away. I don't know why everybody's panicking. Where's your husband?"

It was a question that he didn't want to ask, but this thing with a married woman left him insecure. He had visions of Lonnie Beaumont barreling in on them with a loaded gun.

"You worry too much." She laughed casually. "He's up on the mainland shoring up some property he owns. He'll be gone for a couple of days."

She stood and placed her body against his. Her arms encircled his neck, and all of his fears began to dissipate. When she locked her legs around his hips, he stopped caring completely.

She was too much woman for one man, and he had convinced himself that he was doing her husband a favor. He carried her to the bed and lost himself in her. He yearned for Adrienne Beaumont like he yearned for life, but trying to keep her was like holding on to mist. She wasn't there even when she was with him, but when she was with him there was nowhere else he wanted to be.



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"We could leave, you know."

The words were whispered only inches from his ear. Her soft husky voice massaged his mind. It had been rendered weak and compliant anyway. An hour in bed with Adrienne Beaumont could break the will of any man.

"What are you talking about?" Kane asked.

"Us," she replied. "We could leave. You're always talking about what we could do if we were together. He's not coming back right away, and if the storm hits he'll expect me to go to the mainland. If I left, no one would think anything of it. Everyone is trying to get out ahead of the storm."

"Where would we go?"

The line of conversation was a surprise. It was easy to talk about a long-term commitment when it was all but impossible to achieve. Kane hadn't been prepared to give such a thing serious thought.

"What difference does it make? We'll be with each other. Isn't that what you said you wanted? We could be a long way from here in two days. I've got some money . . . enough to last us until I can find some work. You're a writer. You can work anywhere. This storm may be a blessing. This could be our chance."

"Uh . . . look. We've got to think this out," Kane replied.

"What the hell is there to think about? Don't tell me you're just all talk."

She sat up straight, and her eyes burned into him. Her words were like vitriol. Suddenly he felt inadequate and was afraid that he appeared as such to her. That was something his ego and his manhood couldn't bear.

"I just meant that we . . . uh . . . we need to plan this carefully."

He hoped that his lie wasn't so transparent. Long-term relationships required long-term planning. He hadn't planned to agree to a long-term relationship today. He hadn't planned to run away with another man's wife. He hadn't planned to give real life to his fantasies.

A smile crept across her face, and she melted against him again. The fire in her eyes now replaced by passion, she was leading him back down that path he yearned for again. Somehow it wasn't as inviting as it had been earlier, but not distasteful enough to make him back away.

They went in different directions after leaving the Greenwood. Kane paid the bill in cash while Adrienne went directly to her car, minimizing the chances that they would be seen together. Kane headed down the frontage road back to his small bungalow.

Joe Walker waved frantically as Kane's rusting VW Beetle drove past his home. Kane cringed. Why had he decided to come this way?

Kane had known Joe Walker for years. A struggling writer needed well-to-do friends. Walker was a divorced stockbroker with more than a touch of larceny in his heart. He had made a sufficient amount of money by age forty that he had no further need for work. He spent his days polishing his BMW, tooling around in his Cigarette boat, and begging Kane to fix him up with women half his age.

"Hey! What happened to you? I thought you were gonna help me out today. I've got to board this house up before the storm. Everybody's busy. I've got to do it myself."

"Something came up," Kane explained sheepishly. "I'm sorry."

Walker looked him up and down, shaking his head in dismay.

"Sorry is right," he observed. "I should hang out with a better class of friends. Looks like you suddenly got crap for brains."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you're gonna mess with another man's wife, you ought to do it somewhere other than a place with one way in and one way out."

Kane was momentarily speechless. He had thought they had been careful. If Joe Walker knew, what did Lonnie Beaumont know?

"It's not what you think," he replied.

They stared at each other stoically for several seconds before Walker started laughing. His laughter was humorless—almost sarcastic but still infectious. It made it difficult for Kane to restrain his own laughter. The remark had been so lame that laughter was the only response it deserved.

"Look. I hope you know what you're doing. Lonnie Beaumont doesn't play that. Killing a man for messing with your wife ain't a crime around here."

"I'll keep that in mind," Kane said. "When are you leaving?"

"A couple of days," Walker replied. "The storm's stalled out in the gulf, so I've got a little more time. Besides, it doesn't take that long to get up to Montgomery. I could leave a lot sooner if I had some help."

"Sorry, but I'm trying to get out myself."

Walker looked at him curiously.

"But you never leave. You always ride 'em out. What's the deal?"

"There's a first for everything," Kane explained. He drove away before Walker could respond because he didn't want to keep talking about his personal situation. In his rearview mirror he could see Walker watching him all the way to the end of the street.



By the following day, Kane found his thoughts of Adrienne coalescing into something that resembled a plan. He wasn't sure, however, that it was a plan of his own choosing.

He had been drawn to her because she was safe. She was a geyser of energy that was available enough to satisfy his appetites but sufficiently engaged otherwise to limit the disruption of his personal ambitions. She was tied to Lonnie Beaumont but not devoted to him. Kane had imagined that it could continue that way indefinitely, as they played out their fantasies, repeated words that neither felt compelled to honor. It was the jackpot, the lottery, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Who needed to possess the prize when the reward was available to enjoy at will?

Now everything had changed. He was being told that the prize was his to keep. And he had begun to view their plan as something both possible and probable.

His phone rang. Her voice was both welcomed and dreaded.

"He's coming back this evening. I don't know what to do."

Adrienne's tremulous voice started his heart pounding.

"But I thought you said . . ."

"I know what I said," she interrupted. "He's on his way back now! What can we do?"

The frequent harsh outbursts were something he hadn't noticed in her until recently, and he found them disturbing. She had always seemed vulnerable, even passive.

"Maybe we should back off," he suggested.

He cringed as the words escaped his lips, but this was an opportunity. Something inside of him seemed to be pulling him back.

"I don't want to do that," she said. She hesitated and an uncomfortable silence settled between them.

"Are you having second thoughts?" she asked.

"No. No. Not at all."

It was a lie he hadn't wanted to tell, and he couldn't understand why he seemed so powerless.

"You sound different," she observed. "I don't throw myself at men. I guess when a man says he loves you, it's reasonable to take him at his word."

He could feel the knife digging into him, and he couldn't stop it. It carved a hole in his heart and exposed the guilt he had tried to hide.

What was he supposed to say after spending a night naked and sweating all over her? What is the proper response when a woman says I love you? The truth was that he wanted her, but he wanted her when he wanted her, and that wasn't all of the



time. It was a thought that would never see the light of day.

"Nothing's changed," he finally said.

By noon there was a noticeable increase in the velocity of the wind. Whitecaps rolled onto the shore with increasing frequency and crashed incessantly into the nearby jetties.

Kane was alone now, convinced that an opportunity missed was an irretrievable loss. He looked at his meager possessions in an effort to decide what was useful and what was expendable. He had reluctantly arrived at the conclusion that they had a chance. They would be long gone before her husband realized what had happened. They would be obscured among the hundreds of people evacuating the island. It could be days before it became apparent that his wife had not simply been misdirected in her attempt to join him.

His phone interrupted his thoughts.

"Danny, he's coming back. He's coming back!"

Adrienne's voice was anxious and desperate.

Her words chilled him. He had come to accept a plan that was relatively benign. Simply leaving the island and disappearing was innocuous enough, but the possibility of a confrontation was unnerving. He didn't like problems or complications. Simply put, he wasn't ready for this.

"When? What?"

"I don't know. Now I suppose."

"What did you tell him?"

"I . . . I told him I would rather meet him, but he insisted. He's coming tonight!"

"Then we have to table it. There'll be another time."

"I don't want to table it!" she screamed. "I can't deal with this. We can go now!"

"I can't. I have manuscripts. I have equipment. I . . . I have things I can't leave behind."

He was making excuses, but they seemed plausible to him, and they kept him from facing his real insecurities.

"What about your friend?" she asked.

"Who?"

"Joe . . . Joe Walker."

It was a small island. Everybody knew everybody else. He just wasn't aware that she knew that he and Joe were friends.

"What can he possibly have to do with this?"

"I just thought that you could leave some of your things at his place. I could pick you up from there, and we could be out of here before Lonnie arrives."

Kane couldn't think. This was happening too fast. Hasty decisions were never good.

"You do still want me, don't you?"

That last question destroyed any resistance he might have had left. He recognized that as being his core problem. He wanted her passionately and desperately.

The afternoon rain began as a gentle shower. The almost imperceptible counterclockwise rotation of the dark clouds above, however, portended more threatening things to come.

Kane stood outside of Joe Walker's home, impervious to the continuous drizzle.

"Man, you got the nerve of a brass-ass monkey," Walker laughed sarcastically. "Now let me get this straight. You don't have time to do me a favor, but you want me to do you one. Is that the way it is?"

"Yeah," Kane answered sheepishly. "I was wondering if I could leave my car in your garage along with a few other things. I'll come and get them later."

Walker's face clouded with curiosity, but Kane thought he saw something much darker and confusing.

"If you're leaving your car here, how are you getting out of town? Naw. You wouldn't . . ."

Kane's cell phone abruptly stopped Walker's speculation.

"He's here, Danny. He's here!"

Her voice was a tremulous whisper.

"But I thought you said . . ."

"He's here!" she repeated. "I think he knows!"

"How could he?"

"Oh, God! Oh—" Her voice rose in a crescendo that ended in a scream.

Kane called her name, but there was no response. The phone went dead.

"I've got to go," Kane yelled as he ran toward his car.

"What are you doing, man?" Walker yelled back. "What's going on?"

The VW sped down the narrow streets in driving rain. The Beaumont home appeared quiet, giving no hint of the conflict that was unfolding inside. He listened at the front entrance, but there was nothing.

Two well-placed kicks to the door splintered the jamb, swinging the door inside.

The interior was dark. The blinds were closed. Kane considered turning on the lights, but thought better of it: There was an eerie stillness in the house. He entered cautiously and moved silently



across the carpeted floor. His eyes strained to see in the subdued light.

His foot struck something, sending him sprawling face down. He rolled over, quickly rising to his knees. He was in the bedroom, but it also seemed empty. Then he saw it. He saw what he had stumbled over. A dark form lay crumpled on the floor.

Kane knocked over a heavy brass lamp at the bedside as he made a terrified scramble to reach it. It didn't work, and he quickly ran to the wall switch. He was hyperventilating uncontrollably and almost on the verge of passing out. The overhead fixture bathed the room in light. There was a body on the floor, but it wasn't Adrienne. It was her husband. It was Lonnie Beaumont.

He froze then, unable to think. Gazing at the body, his eyes drank in the scene before him. Dark red splotches stained the carpet. He crawled closer, unwilling to believe what he was seeing. He gingerly shook the body. The skin had a cool, leathery feel. Blood had congealed on his face. His arms were rigid and didn't move when agitated.

The room was neat and clean. The bed was undisturbed. A lampshade lay on the floor against the wall. It apparently belonged to the bedside lamp that didn't work. His eyes remained fixed on the lamp. Dark dried blood stained its base.

Kane felt his stomach boiling as uncontrolled emotions surged through him. He recoiled from the touch of the dead man's skin as if he had been struck by an electrical charge. He raced for the door because the only thought that he could manage was to get out of there. He ran out into the driving rain, when the lights abruptly went out. He had the vague perception of a sudden pain in his head, and then there was nothing.

"I knew you were stupid, boy, but I didn't know you were this stupid."

The world was a blur, immersing Kane in sounds that he struggled to decipher. The howl of wind gusts and the drumming of incessant rain confused him as he tried to focus on his surroundings. He was lying in the foyer of the Beaumont home, and Rob Manley's craggy face filled his field of vision. The island's chief of police didn't have a humorous bone in his body. Kane could never remember seeing the man smile, and today he appeared more solemn than usual. He tried to sit up and realized that his hands were restrained.

"What the hell's going on?" Kane asked.

"Don't move. We're waiting for the ambulance," Manley replied, ignoring the question.

"Why am I in cuffs?"

"You're at a house with the dead body of the husband of the woman you were screwing. What do you think?"

The weight of his circumstances dropped on Kane like a ton of bricks. How many people knew about him? Well, so much for being discreet.

"I didn't do this."

"I'm supposed to tell you that you got the right to remain silent," Manley interrupted and proceeded to read him the Miranda warning.

"He was dead when I got here," Kane continued when Manley finished. "Somebody hit me."

"Looks like you slipped on the wet pavement and hit your head. We didn't see any evidence of anyone else being here."

Kane took a deep breath. He could see where this was going.

"He was already dead when I got here. You know me, man. You know I couldn't do this."

"I didn't think you were dumb enough to meet another man's wife at the Greenwood Motel once a week. That just goes to show you can't tell what a person will do."

"He was cold and stiff when I got here, Rob. How long does that take?"

Manley shrugged.

"It depends," he replied. "The coroner will determine time of death."

"Adrienne. What happened to Adrienne . . . Mrs. Beaumont? She called me. She was in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" Manley asked.

"I don't know. I think he was trying to hurt her."

"Mrs. Beaumont is over on the mainland with her family. Her husband was here trying to secure his property like everybody else. You had access to the goodies whenever you wanted them, boy. Why couldn't you be satisfied with that?"

"Look, I talked to her. She told me . . ." Kane hesitated. He suspected that he was digging a hole for himself. He didn't know what the hell was going on, and he didn't need to give Manley any fuel to help fry him.

"I've got an alibi." He finally said. "I was with Joe Walker earlier today. He can vouch for me."

**T**he trip to the local hospital was brief but thorough. They did a CT scan of Kane's head and pronounced him fit for imprisonment. Afterward he was transported to the small local lockup. He

suspected that they would move him to the county facility on the mainland the following day.

The island's jail was a relatively low-key facility. It looked more like a commercial office building than a prison. They had limited space for confining inmates in the lower level. The officers were locals, most of whom were familiar to Kane.

"Hey, Danny. What are you in here for—making a nuisance of yourself to women?"

He gave Rick Brody the finger in response to his question. They had played on the same high school football team. In the yearbook, Rick had listed his ambition to become the director of the FBI. Working at the Dauphin Island jail seemed to be as far as he got, but he wasn't the only one who had settled for something less than his dreams.

"Don't look so glum, man. You'll probably be out of here by tomorrow. This is your first time in here, ain't it? It ain't so bad. You remember when they locked me up that time I got drunk and drove my daddy's car off the pier?"

Kane found himself laughing for the first time. He remembered Rick's dad kicking the fifteen-year-old's behind right on the steps of the jail when they released him.

By now Kane could hear the wind through the walls of the jail. Joe had said that the storm was stalled out in the gulf, but it didn't sound that way to him.

Eventually the repetitive sound of wind and rain lulled Kane to sleep. It was a restless slumber, but he made the best of the hard cot and the questions that raged in his head.

When things go bad, they just seem to continue in that direction. Even sleep was not meant for him. He was awakened to Rob Manley's stern visage.

"I checked your story out, sport," he said. "Joe Walker said he hadn't seen you in days. He said you were supposed to help him board up his house, but you never showed."

"I just saw him today!"

Kane sat erect abruptly, astonished by what he was hearing. "I ... I talked to him about storing some of my things in his garage. Hey, he was kidding. He was just pulling your leg."

"Do I look like the kind of man who would put up with kidding over something like this?" Manley asked.

The answer was obvious, so Kane didn't bother to respond. Joe was probably pissed. Kane had broken a promise, but this was over the top. Why would he lie, particularly if he knew the gravity of the situation? Why would he let them stick him in jail over that kind of bs? This meant he was prepared to tell that same lie

in court. After all, he couldn't just tell the police that he made a mistake. He couldn't tell them that he forgot, but he finally remembered. He was being screwed for a reason, and he didn't want to think about what it really was.

"What about Adrienne . . . Mrs. Beaumont?"

"What about her?" Manley asked.

"She may know what happened. She might be able to tell you that it wasn't me."

"I told you she's on the mainland. I had to tell her about her husband over the telephone. She was devastated. She can't help you."

"That can't be. I just talked to her. She was telling me her husband . . ."

Kane stopped his words abruptly. He didn't know what was in the chief's mind. He needed a lawyer before he said anything else.

"What?" Manley asked.

"Nothing . . . nothing," Kane replied.

**K**ane didn't know what interrupted his slumber first, the noise of the storm or Rick Brody clamoring through the cellblock.

The metallic clang and grind of moving metal doors merged with the excited gibberish of overlapping voices. Kane jumped to his feet as overhead lights illuminated the cellblock.

"C'mon, Danny. Get the hell out of here."

"What's going on?" Kane asked.

"We just got an order to evacuate," Rick Brody answered.

"Where we going?"

"You're on your own. Don't get lost. You better find your way back here in a couple of days," Brody said.

Kane gazed at him with astonishment, almost unwilling to venture out of the cell with the others.

"Where's the chief?" Kane asked.

"Why the hell do you care?" Brody asked laughingly. "Hell, I ain't never seen nobody who didn't want to get out of jail."

Brody watched Kane's reluctance with curiosity.

"Look, the chief's up on the strip. They're trying to push the holdouts off the island. You ain't gon' be in no trouble. We do this every time an evacuation order comes down. All we got back here is a bunch of drunks and misfits like you. It ain't worth transporting y'all over to the mainland lockup. Everybody knows you. We'll just pick y'all up after the storm passes."

Kane realized that he was standing there with his mouth open and not quite believing what he was hearing. The storm had overex-

tended the small police force. Rick Brody hadn't bothered to confirm why he was in the lockup. Since they never incarcerated people for any serious crimes there, Brody had assumed that, like the others, Kane was in there for drinking, fighting, smoking dope, or some other trivial offense. All of these guys lived on the island and were on a first-name basis with the police, so they could be easily picked up at their homes or jobs at any time. The chief wouldn't be so generous and probably had no idea of the humongous gaff Rick Brody was about to make, but that wasn't his problem.

"You need a ride or anything?" Brody asked as they walked toward the front of the jail.

"No. No. I'm all right," Kane replied cautiously. He looked around nervously expecting the bubble to burst at any second.

"I hear the interstate's bumper to bumper," Rick said as Kane stepped into the rain. "You know them back roads, don't you?"

Kane faded into the darkness. He watched the line of cars creeping north across the bridge. There was no one walking south except him. He hoped to find what he needed in that direction, and he needed to find it before Chief Manley discovered what Rick Brody had done.

His car was still at Adrienne's home, and returning there would be profoundly stupid, but there was another place he needed to go, and maybe he could kill two birds with one stone. He needed answers and a way off the island, and there was only one place that he might find both.

The sky had become a blackened void that hurled torrents of rain and howling wind to the earth below. The driving rain whipped Kane mercilessly as he leaned his weight into it until he achieved a precarious balance. As he approached Joseph Walker's home, he saw that only the wooden entry door remained free of protective plywood boards.

No one answered the bell. Like anyone with a reasonable amount of intelligence, Joe Walker had probably left the island for safer ground. Kane's hopes were rapidly dissolving in the rush of wind and water that pelted the island.

An unexpected light source found Kane's peripheral vision. He turned toward it and witnessed the garage door's slow ascent. He ran through the pounding rain and confronted a startled Joseph Walker.

Walker just gazed at him as if struck silent with utter surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he finally asked.

"Didn't expect to see me, huh? Thought I'd be locked away in jail, huh?"

Kane walked closer to Walker, who slowly backed closer to his car. "Why did you do it?" Kane asked. "What did I ever do to you? It couldn't have been this business about your house."

"What's the big deal? Manley let you out, didn't he? So you spent a few hours in the cooler. So what?"

Kane was on him before he could flinch. He grabbed Walker's neck. All of the night's frustrations boiled inside him. He wanted to choke the life out of Walker, but he wanted to know why it had happened.

"You sonofabitch! You were supposed to be my friend!" Kane yelled.

"I'm not your damned friend!" Walker said as he shoved Kane away from him. "Why would you think she would be interested in someone like you?"

Walker rubbed his neck and gasped for air.

"Look at you," he continued. "You make up stories for a living. You . . . you wait tables, bait hooks for tourists. What could she possibly see in you?"

"Is that what this is about . . . Adrienne? You've got a thing for Adrienne? Did you kill her husband?"

"Kill her husband?" Walker replied. "What are you talking about?"

It suddenly dawned on Kane that Walker might not know as much as he had presumed.

"What do you think Manley arrested me for?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. He just wanted to know if I had seen you. I figured you had gotten drunk and done something stupid."

"Somebody killed Lonnie Beaumont. They hit me over the head. They probably called the cops so that they could find me there. That makes things look pretty bad for me."

"Not a bad plan though," Walker mused.

"Yeah, but you can clear me. You can tell Manley I was with you earlier. I don't know the exact time of death, but he had been dead for a while when I found him."

Walker started moving toward his car's door again.

"Now exactly why would I want to do that?"

Kane was speechless. If Walker wasn't involved in Beaumont's death, why would he be so intent on burning him?

"You disgust me!" Walker hissed. "I don't know what she saw in you. I offered her everything, but she kept crawling after you every weekend when you decided to make some time for her."

It was like a slap in the face. Kane had thought he was sharing Adrienne with her husband. He had never imagined that he was sharing her with Joseph Walker. Maybe he had a sixth sense, how-



ever. Something always needled him about her. There was always that reluctance to commitment that he harbored inside. He had never known why it was there, but he didn't question its significance. He was sleeping with another man's wife, and in his heart of hearts that was as much as he wanted out of the relationship.

"So she was screwing both of us," Kane finally acknowledged.

"She was screwing you," Walker retorted. "She made love to me." He opened the door to his car.

"You dumb sonofabitch," Kane said. "If I didn't kill her husband, and you didn't kill him, who the hell do you think did it?"

"Does it matter?"

"It matters to me, and it ought to matter to you if you think you're gonna end up with her. If you play this one out, you're gonna have to sleep with one eye open for the rest of your life."

"I'll take my chances."

"Where is she? You're meeting her somewhere?"

"I'm right here, Danny."

Adrienne Beaumont walked out of the home's entry into the garage. They had been together, and she had probably overheard the entire altercation.

"That's an interesting theory that you have, but you're the one who's been arrested for my husband's murder."

She walked over to the car and stood next to Walker.

Adrienne was moving with a deliberate calmness. She seemed distant and aloof while projecting a smug serenity. There was no grief in her eyes. She seemed far less emotional than Kane had been accustomed to observing. She held her right hand close to her side as if trying to obscure something. Kane could see the pistol, but he pretended that he was unaware of it.

"So what's next?" he asked. "Where do we go from here?"

"We don't go anywhere," she answered. Then she made the gun's presence obvious.

Walker grinned with apparent conceit. He had been chosen. He moved to encircle her shoulders with his arm, but she stepped away and leveled the gun at his chest. There was a loud metallic click as the firing pin collided with the round in the revolver's chamber, but the bullet failed to discharge.

Walker was frozen by shock and disbelief. His back was plastered against his car when the revolver misfired a second time.

Kane jumped toward them, but the third time was a charm. The muzzle erupted a few inches from Walker's chest.

Adrienne whirled as Walker's dying body fell forward into Kane's path.

Kane found the revolver trained on him. It made him back away.

"How you gonna fix this?" he asked. "You just killed another man. They can tell that you've fired a gun."

"They've got no reason to look at me. It's not my gun. It's his gun. You came here looking for revenge for what he told the police. The two of you fought and . . ."

"Killing is that easy for you?"

"What do you know about me? What do you know about what I had to live with? Lonnie Beaumont was a piece of crap. He did things to me that a dog wouldn't tolerate. I deserve something out of life, and I'm taking it."

"I was nothing to you but a part of the plan, I guess," Kane said. "Somebody to take the fall for killing your husband. You never cared about me, did you?"

He was desperate. He had to keep her talking.

"As much as you cared about me," she replied. "As long as you were getting what you wanted, you didn't care about what I wanted."

"When did you kill him—yesterday, the day before? Was he already dead while we were at The Greenwood? Was it you or your dead friend who coldcocked me when I left the house?"

She pulled the trigger abruptly, and once again nothing happened.

Kane lunged toward her, but she was quicker. She dropped the gun as she slid into the driver's seat of Walker's car. She started the engine and barreled into the storm before he could catch her.

Kane slid to the floor and stared into the raging weather. There was nothing else he could do. His eyes settled on the pistol. It was an old weapon, and it had probably laid in a drawer for the last ten years or so. Only one bullet out of four fired. What goes around comes around. Joe Walker's dirty deed had probably made him the unfortunate recipient of that piece of ill luck.

Adrienne had made a mistake of colossal proportions. The gun she had dropped would be his salvation.

Rob Manley's car drove up to the open garage. He looked stoically at Joe Walker's crumpled body, then back at Kane.

"You do that?" he asked casually.

"You think I'm that stupid?" Kane replied.

"Maybe," he said. "We found a bag of golf clubs in Beaumont's closet. One of the clubs had blood and hair on the shaft."

"So?" Kane said.

"Beaumont appears to have been killed with multiple blows to the head with a brass lamp in the bedroom. The coroner says he was killed earlier in the day. I figure if he were killed with the

lamp, there would be no reason to hit him with the golf club. Maybe somebody hit you on the way out of the house just like you said. The forensics people will match blood and tissue, and we'll see."

"Adrienne Beaumont is in Joe's car on her way to the mainland," Kane said.

"It's a small island," Manley chuckled. "One way in and one way out. Whose fingerprints am I gonna find on that gun?"

"Won't be mine." Kane grinned for the first time.

Kane sat in Manley's car as other officers arrived to secure the crime scene. The storm still roared around him, but he was at peace. It was a small island filled with small people living lies and entrapped by catastrophes of their own making. It was a small island—one way in and one way out. Each one of them had discovered a way out. Kane recognized his good fortune: He was blessed with the only way that mattered. ♣

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# MOON CAKES

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I. J. PARKER

**H**EIAN-KYO (KYOTO): ELEVENTH CENTURY, NEAR THE NEW YEAR.

The old monk leaned heavily on his tall staff. He wore a thin old robe, and the drifting snow had dusted his large-brimmed straw hat and the ragged straw cape with white. His straw sandals clung to feet that were blue with cold.

Hosshu, who had gate duty at the temple, eyed him suspiciously. The monk looked weak with fatigue as he took the steps one at a time, resting often, making small gasping sounds of effort or pain. Hosshu had no patience with wandering beggars who thought they served the Buddha by renouncing the world so completely that they became a burden on others. This one looked like one of those hermits who spend their lives in some primitive hut on a mountaintop, eating bark and acorns, and then decide to seek out a temple because they are sick and need a place to die.

It was sinful, to his way of thinking, to run up new debts when one should be clearing his accounts before the New Year. This old beggar was bringing bad luck—and probably disease—at this auspicious time.

"You, there," he called out from a safe distance. "Best not tarry here. It's getting dark and the snow's getting worse. I'm about to lock up for the night."

The old monk stopped and raised his head so he could look up at Hosshu from under the brim of his hat. His face was deeply lined and pale except for some feverish redness under the eyes. "I need a place to stay overnight," he said in a meek voice. "Just until the New Year."

Hosshu shook his head firmly. "Not here, old fellow. We're full up for the celebrations." In fact, room might have been found, but the abbot expected noble visitors and would not want them offended by the sight and smell of this one—or worse, infected by whatever disease the man carried.

Because of the meekness of the man's plea, Hosshu expected him to turn around promptly and retreat under the rock he had crawled from, but the old monk's eyes narrowed, he grasped his

staff more firmly, and took the last steps with surprising energy.

"You have no business turning people away," he said quite sharply. "Now go to your abbot and tell him that I must stay." He waved Hosshu away with an imperious gesture.

Hosshu opened his mouth in outraged response, but the strange monk hobbled past him and lowered himself to the ground under the sweeping roof of the temple gate. He clearly was not going to leave, and Hosshu did not want to touch him. Biting his lip, he went for reinforcements.

The day after New Year's, the sun reappeared, the snow began to melt, and Akitada took his dog for a walk to check for signs of spring among the many trees along the banks of the Kamo River.

An hour later, they were back, muddy, chilled, and limping. The dog had picked up a thorn in one paw, and Akitada's old leg injury rebelled against the cold and exertion. Akitada sat down in the warm sunshine on the steps to his house to remove the thorn and then brush dirt and twigs out of the dog's coat. After his unfortunate remark about the excessively sweet moon cakes this morning, he had no wish to offend his wife and staff again. His household had been under the impression that he was fond of the sweet confection and had gone to great lengths to procure the ingredients and to prepare the cakes for the New Year. Now an instant coldness had spread through the family, and Akitada had escaped to the less complicated relationship with his dog.

The dog, aptly named Trouble, had been with him for several years now, and because both managed to give offense to the women in the household despite their best intentions, a bond had formed between them. Akitada was brushing, making soothing comments, and getting his face licked when the tall, well-dressed monk arrived.

Young monks of a lofty type were not seen very often at his house, and Akitada suspected this one might be lost.

"Yes?" he asked while Trouble went to investigate the visitor.

"The servant sent me to you." The monk twitched his neat, black silk robe away from the dog's inquisitive nose and stared down at Akitada, whose muddy gown was covered with gray dog hairs. "Umm, Lord Sugawara?" he asked dubiously, kicking the persistent dog away. Trouble wrinkled up his nose and growled.

"Yes." Akitada called the dog back and resumed brushing him. He aimed the strokes of his brush vigorously in the monk's direction. "And you are?"

The monk stepped away from the cloud of dog hairs and extended a folded note with two fingers. "Shinnyo, private secretary

to His Imperial Highness, the bishop," he said stiffly and cast another disbelieving glance at the semiruinous state of the Sugawara residence. It was clear that he thought master, dog, and house well matched, and unworthy of his visit.

But Akitada forgot him. He laid down the brush and unfolded the note. Only one member of the imperial family was a bishop, and he was an old friend.

A few hours later, he sat, more suitably attired, in Bishop Sesshin's study, sipping hot tea and feeling sorrowful.

Sesshin had grown shockingly old. Once a plump man filled with lively energy, he had shrunk to a mere shadow of himself. His eyes were still kind, but his hands shook, and his skin hung in yellow folds where the flesh had disappeared from the bones. It was all too easy to see the grinning skull beneath the face.

Worse, there was a vagueness in Sesshin's manner that suggested he had little patience for business with the living any longer. Seeing him this way grieved Akitada greatly because he was fond of Sesshin.

"You and your family are well, I trust?" he asked Akitada after a long silence.

"Yes, Excellency." No point in reminding this unworldly man that they had lost their only child in a recent epidemic and were patching up the pieces of their married life.

"Good," Sesshin murmured and plucked at his sleeve.

Akitada shifted a little to ease his painful leg and wondered if Sesshin had forgotten that he sent for him. "I hope all is well with Your Excellency?" he ventured, after another long pause.

Sesshin tried to speak and coughed instead, a cough that left him gasping. Shinnyo, the secretary, rushed over to hand him his cup and help him drink. "I am old and weary and shall die soon," Sesshin said when the fit was over. Akitada opened his mouth to protest, but Sesshin waved the words away. "Don't bother, Akitada. There is no time." Each sentence was an effort for the prince-bishop, who spoke in short gasps, catching his breath in between. "I have sent for you . . . because something has happened that I wish to set right if I can. It involves a member of my family and may affect the imperial succession."

Akitada hid his shock and waited.

Sesshin took a ragged breath and said, "You may leave us now, Shinnyo." He waited until the door had closed behind the secretary, then said, "There is a person, a very highly placed person . . ." He paused to take another sip of tea, with a hand that shook so badly that he spilt some. The fine brocade stole, Akitada saw, was

already stained. Sesshin began again. "Never mind. I trust you and hate all this secrecy. The second prince is in trouble."

Prince Atsuhiro was Sesshin's nephew and uncle to the reigning emperor who was still very young. The prince had a reputation for great charm and learning and was very well liked by high and low alike.

"I hope it is nothing serious," Akitada said, aware that it probably was.

"It may cost him his life," Sesshin said bleakly. "He wrote a letter to a young woman. A letter from a man in love is from a man not in his right mind." He took another sip of tea. "It expresses a wish that he were emperor so that he could make her his empress."

"Oh!" That was indeed serious. Wishing to remove an emperor in order to ascend the throne oneself was a matter of high treason. Akitada asked, "Who has the letter now?"

Sesshin was racked by another cough and reached for his cup again. "You get right to the point as always," he said after a moment. "I do not know. And, yes, in the wrong hands that letter is his end. It will be interpreted . . . as calling on the gods to strike His Majesty dead. The prince has a poetic temperament. He doesn't always mean what he writes. In any case . . . I was offered the letter for a very large amount of gold. A friend was to make the payment and bring the letter to me." Sesshin's breath rattled alarmingly after this effort.

Akitada thought. "There may not have been a letter, Your Excellency," he suggested. "A daring criminal may merely have pretended to have it in order to collect the gold."

Sesshin shook his head. "I am not in my dotage, Akitada. He provided a copy, and I showed it to the second prince. The prince admitted writing it. No, an evil man has got hold of the letter. And my friend has disappeared along with the gold."

More puzzling information. The prince-bishop's friend was surely a high-ranking nobleman, and those who "lived above the clouds" did not disappear unless they wished to do so. "Do you want me to find him?"

Sesshin looked bleak. "He may be dead. I want you to find the letter. Since nothing has happened, there may still be time. Do you know Kiyomizu-dera?"

"The Pure Water Temple? Yes, of course."

"I know the abbot, and though it was not easy at my age, I paid him a visit the night before the New Year. That accounts for my illness. My friend was to bring the letter to me there. He never came." The bishop gave Akitada a pleading look. "Since he would



not betray me, he must be dead. Will you help? Perhaps I am sending you on a dangerous journey, but I may not live long." He broke off to cough again.

Akitada said quickly, "I am honored by your trust and shall do my utmost." He tried to sound optimistic but was more at sea than ever. "Who is this friend, Excellency?"

"A hermit. His name used to be Ueda. Please find out what happened. Quietly. We can trust no one."

The name meant nothing to Akitada. He felt completely inadequate to the request, but he said, "Of course, Your Excellency. Where does this Ueda live?"

"I believe he travels among the temples near the capital. But you must not ask for him by name. Thank you, Akitada." Sesshin sighed and closed his eyes.

When the secretary saw Akitada out, he said, "He is very ill. I have to lift him. He can no longer stand or walk without support. Please be sure to do whatever he asks. The worry is very bad for him."

Akitada revised his first impression. He still did not like Shinnyo very much, but the young monk clearly cared for the ailing bishop.

**I**t was an impossible case. Akitada was to find a hermit he had never met and who must remain nameless. Moreover, he could not let anyone know he was looking for him. And somewhere, someone had collected a great deal of gold for a letter that had disappeared along with the hermit.

If indeed the exchange had taken place.

If it had not, or if the hermit had been killed and the murderer had found it, then the letter might already be on offer to the prince's enemies.

Akitada decided to begin at Kiyomizu-dera. On the way into the snowy hills on the outskirts of the capital, he thought about Sesshin dying. Such thoughts always brought back his own grief for his son. This time he felt doubly bereft, for he would lose a good and loyal friend who had often interceded on Akitada's behalf in the past.

He forced his mind to consider the situation. Sesshin had said that the missing letter affected the succession. The young emperor had put on a man's trousers a year ago but had not yet produced a son. There were some nasty rumors that he enjoyed himself with pages. The appointment of a crown prince would assure the succession, should the emperor die childless. And Sesshin's candidate surely was the second prince, of whom he was

quite fond. Equally surely, the chancellor was opposed to such an arrangement.

Someone was playing a very dangerous game, and Akitada was about to step into the middle of it.

At the temple gate, he tied up his horse and went to sign the visitors' book. An eager young monk appeared at his side.

"Abbot Genshin will be delighted to receive you, My Lord," the chatty young man informed him after a glance at his name. "Just now he has some troublesome visitors, but I doubt they'll stay long. Can you imagine? They think we are hiding their senile father. It's nonsense, of course, but the reverend father decided to speak to them. May I show you around meanwhile?"

The young monk seemed tolerant of eccentric questions, so Akitada asked, "Do you ever lose any of your visitors up here?" He gestured around at the steep, densely wooded mountain site and haphazard disposition of halls, paths, and stone steps.

The young monk laughed heartily. "'In the great Void,'" he quoted, "'nothing is lost because nothing exists.' Here, if worshippers lose their way, they start shouting and we go get them."

Akitada saw that his guide was certainly nimble enough to rescue lost souls. He, on the other hand, had a painful leg and was quickly out of breath.

Beyond the Gate of the Benevolent Kings stood an ancient bell tower. Akitada sat down on a rocky outcropping to admire it. The bell tower was a small building, stone below and wood above, but the gracefully curving roof was missing tiles, and stones and plaster had fallen from the foundation. A mangy cat sniffed nearby.

The young monk took the opportunity to urge a donation. "We lack the funds for a proper rebuilding program," he explained, clapping his hands at the cat, which gave him a baleful look.

Akitada's own home needed repairs even more urgently than the bell tower.

"The bell is quite large and has a particularly fine tone," the monk continued. "We rang it the night before the New Year. One hundred and eight times, one stroke for every human weakness that must be discarded before the new year can be faced with a pure mind." He frowned and picked up a rock to throw at the cat. The cat hissed and departed.

Akitada considered human weaknesses, including those that made young monks throw rocks at harmless cats. "Did you have many visitors that night?"

"Oh no. The abbot had a guest, that's all. Just as well. It wasn't Hosshu's best performance, I'm afraid. The ringing was very ragged."

"Hmm. What about travelers seeking shelter?"

"Oh, we get beggars sometimes, but Hosshu is quite firm with them."

"Ah, yes," muttered Akitada. "One must be firm with beggars." He rose and they walked through another gate, past a three-storied pagoda with handsome red lacquer trim, then climbed up and down a number of steep flights of stone steps. Akitada's guide returned to the subject of the institution's many services and needs while Akitada wished himself elsewhere. Shivering in the chill air, he interrupted the lecture to ask the monk if greeting visitors was among his regular duties.

"Oh no. I'm helping out today because our regular gatekeeper isn't here. Just like Hosshu to go off on his own business."

"This Hosshu must be a very busy monk," Akitada observed, suppressing a sneeze and wondering if he would pay with a cold for this excursion.

"Ha-ha!" laughed the young monk. "You don't know Hosshu. He's always trying to get out of work."

When they reached the great hall with its enormous sweeping roofs, Akitada limped inside with a sigh. He made his bow to the eleven-faced and thousand-armed Kannon, briefly admired the gilded divinities, and then stepped out onto the great veranda. This jutted out six stories above a wooded gorge and offered a famous view of the capital below.

His guide pointed out attractions. "Over there is the Shrine of the Eight Hills. It's well attended by ladies because the god who is enshrined there helps lovers."

"Why is that only attractive to ladies?" Akitada asked, thinking of the prince's secret love and the dangerous letter.

"Ha-ha. Gentlemen know their hearts, but they don't always tell, do they? That's very frustrating to women, so they come to ask the god if there is hope." The young monk chuckled. "There are two sacred rocks there. If they can walk blindfolded from one to the other, it means happiness. The shrine priest makes a very good income by offering his arm. We only have the waterfall and the lucky jump. It's not nearly as profitable."

"A lucky jump?"

"Oh yes." The monk leaned over the balustrade and pointed downward. "If you make it down without getting hurt, you will have a wish fulfilled."

Akitada peered into a ravine. "That looks dangerous." Somewhere below he heard the faint sound of water, but the cliff was so thickly overgrown with scrub and evergreens that he could not see the bottom. A large number of crows sat on the branches of a crippled pine tree.

The monk pointed a little to the left. "The waterfall is over there. People call it the Sound of Feathers Fall. Its water cures diseases. We have had many miraculous cures."

"Surely that is more useful than the two rocks," Akitada said. "Or do you have to jump to get down there?"

The monk laughed heartily. "Not quite, but the path is a little steep. Not too many sick people manage it."

Akitada eyed the crows again and sighed. "I would not mind getting rid of this pain in my leg," he said.

The path was precipitous and slippery, especially this time of year. Akitada gritted his teeth. The waterfall, when they reached it, was quite small and pooled into a basin. A bamboo dipper awaited the afflicted believers, and Akitada dipped out a measure of the icy water and drank. He shivered and sneezed.

The young monk clapped his hands. "There! The pain is leaving your body already."

Akitada thought it more likely that he had caught a cold but did not say so. Instead, he limped into the dense shrubbery, heading toward the pine with the crows.

"Where are you going, sir?" his guide cried after him.

"Call of nature."

The crows gave raucous warning cries at his approach and reluctantly rose with a clatter of wings to find a safer perch. On the ground near the pine's trunk, Akitada found what had attracted them. The broken body of a monk lay in a small patch of snow. The dead man might have been sleeping under the tree, except for the season and the odd angle of his head and the blood on his face. His limbs lay relaxed, one arm under his body, the other folded across his middle, and one foot lacked its sandal.

Akitada looked up. The cliff rose sharply to the scaffolding of beams that supported the veranda. It was impossible to see much, for shrubs and trees grew all around him and in the crevices of the cliff. He saw some broken branches, suggesting that the dead man had indeed jumped or fallen from above. In another month or two, the leaves would make even a partial view impossible. If it had not been for the crows, the body might never have been found.

This then was surely Sesshin's missing messenger—dead, to add to Akitada's sense of hopelessness. He bent to search the body. There was no letter. He straightened up, frowned, and made a systematic search of the whole area. He found the other sandal hanging in a shrub quite a distance from the body. In the process, he tore his trousers in several places, knocked his hat askew, scratched his face, and got a large thorn in his right hand. He also sneezed again.

His guide called out to him. Akitada did not bother to answer. He eyed the side of the cliff, then shook his head. How did that sandal get into the shrub? He returned to the body and examined it carefully.

His guide made his way noisily through the underbrush and found him. "There you are, sir. I was getting—" He gave a loud gasp. "Amida! It's Hosshu. What is he doing here?"

Hosshu, the gatekeeper and bell ringer, had a bruised and broken neck. He also had badly bruised shins. Akitada's guide proposed that Hosshu must have taken the jump from the veranda because he wished to be reborn in Paradise.

"But," protested Akitada, "doesn't the Buddha forbid taking your own life? I would have thought that by jumping Hosshu committed a grievous offense and lost salvation."

"Not at all, sir," said the young monk, looking quite cheerful. "Hosshu's faith in the powers of Kannon was so great that I am sure he had his wish granted. Besides, all he had to do was to utter the Buddha's name as he was falling. That is sufficient to gain entrance to the Western Paradise."

Akitada thought it was a wonder that all of the monks had not long since vaulted over the balustrade. Aloud he said, "I believe Hosshu was murdered. You must report his death to the police."

This upset his guide, who insisted on reporting to the abbot first. Akitada was cold, sore, and depressed. His case had just become more complicated. Instead of finding a missing hermit, he had the body of a murdered monk on his hands. With a sigh, he climbed back to the top.

The abbot's attendant, a cadaverous individual with a disconcerting way of watching Akitada from the corner of his eyes, let them in. Akitada's guide reported Hosshu's death with great excitement, not omitting his belief in the miraculous powers of the jump and Hosshu's desire to find a shortcut to Nirvana. Akitada had to cut him off with a demand to see the abbot.

The Venerable Genshin, a handsome, middle-aged cleric, was seated in a comfortable study overlooking the mountains. He was surrounded by warming braziers, books and pictures, elegant writing utensils, and an exquisite small altar with carved figures of the Amida Buddha and two bodhisattvas.

"Lord Sugawara," his assistant announced and left, softly closing the door behind him.

"Please be seated," said the abbot, clearly unimpressed by Akitada's rank. His speech and manner were those of a high court noble, and he made no attempt to be either courteous or friendly. "My assistant tells me you found the body of one of the monks. I

regret extremely that you should have been troubled by this unfortunate affair." He did not quite tsk, but the effect was much the same.

Akitada sat near one of the braziers, with a sigh of relief. Rubbing his chilled hands over its pleasant warmth, he said, "The monk was murdered, Venerable Father. It will be necessary to call the authorities."

The abbot raised thin eyebrows. "Murdered? Come, we must not judge too quickly. It may be that he has allowed his depth of devotion to tempt him, or it may merely have been an accident in the dark."

Genshin, Akitada knew, was related to powerful men with ties to the imperial household. It would not do to offend him, but Akitada did not like his reaction to the death. "I regret, Venerable Father," he said firmly, "but the indications are that he was murdered. Do you know if someone had a reason to wish him dead?"

The abbot refolded his hands and looked at them. "I hope you are wrong, but it is true that Hosshu could be—how shall I put it?—a little irritating. There have been complaints."

"Are you suggesting that one of his fellow monks murdered him because he was irritating?"

Genshin compressed his lips. "Murder is much too strong a word. It could have been mere mischief."

"Mischief?"

"Well, have you considered that perhaps Hosshu was leaning over the railing, and in the heat of an argument someone gave him a little push, never thinking that he would be seriously hurt?"

Akitada slowly shook his head. "No, Father. I saw his neck. He was not killed by the fall. Someone strangled him, breaking his neck, and then pushed him over the railing." He did not mention that he must have lost a sandal in the struggle, and that the murderer had flung that after him.

The abbot opened his eyes wide. "Ridiculous!" he said. "And sacrilegious."

Akitada was at the end of his patience. If only one could be sure not to step on sensitive toes. The prince-bishop had liked the abbot well enough to pay him a visit, but this man was uncomfortably haughty and uncooperative. Akitada had no wish to spend the rest of his life in exile on some godforsaken island because he had interfered in someone's power play. He took a deep breath and said, "I am told two visitors came to you because they think their father disappeared from this temple. Surely the police will come anyway."

The abbot sat up stiffly. "We cannot afford to have ugly rumors

spread. They are mistaken. Their father was never here. Really, you must not imagine that this temple is a den of murderers. That is quite outrageous."

"Surely it would not hurt to make a thorough search of the grounds and buildings and ask some questions. Someone may have seen the old man."

But it was too late. The abbot had become angry and defiant. Tucking his hands into his deep sleeves, he glowered at Akitada. "I cannot imagine why you would doubt my word. If you persist in mentioning this false story to people and spread tales about poor Hosshu's death, I shall be forced to report the matter to His Majesty."

Time to depart, but the ache in Akitada's leg had only just begun to subside. "I beg your pardon, Venerable Father. Finding a body and then hearing that an elderly person got lost at this time of the year caused me to imagine some connection between the two. No doubt his sons will find him soon. What was their name again?"

The abbot huffed. "I do not know. They are in some sort of trade. Such men are very grasping. Possibly they want the temple to reimburse them for the loss of their father."

Akitada nodded. "Ah, you believe him dead then. There is much evil in this world. Thank you very much for explaining the matter." The abbot glared and reluctantly Akitada staggered to his feet. "Perhaps you should mention their attempt at extortion to the police," he suggested.

The abbot snapped, "The police have no jurisdiction here. As for Hosshu's accident, we will deal with it ourselves. I trust you will respect the sanctity of this temple."

It sounded like an order, perhaps even a threat. Akitada bit his lip, bowed again, and left.

His young guide had disappeared, and the abbot's attendant slammed the door behind him. Favoring his sore leg, Akitada limped back to the main gate. When he passed the bell tower, he saw that the cat had returned to its investigations. At the main gate, Akitada found the new gatekeeper and asked if he had heard about his predecessor's death.

The monk shivered. "Yes. They told me."

"I understand he was not well liked?"

The monk looked uncomfortable. "Hosshu got others to do his work, that's all. I didn't know he was so unhappy. I would have been nicer to him."

So the monks thought the death a suicide. Akitada asked, "Could Hosshu have admitted the old man who disappeared?"



"Oh no. His name would be in the visitors' book. I checked."

Akitada accompanied the monk into his cubicle to look for himself. He found his own name and just above it, the names of Yutaka and Hikaru Miyahara. Then he ran his finger up the list of visitors for the week before the New Year. According to the gatekeeper, the names belonged to a merchant family, a group of young monks from another temple, two women, several farmers and tradesmen who had come to collect payment for goods or services before the New Year, and two of the temple's debtors who had discharged their debts.

"What about private guests?" Akitada asked, thinking of Sesshin.

"Private visitors don't sign in."

It seemed that Sesshin's messenger had never reached the temple.

Akitada thanked the monk and got on his horse. On the road home, he caught up with two men who must be the Miyahara brothers.

For brothers, they were very dissimilar. The tall one wore a simple dark robe and looked glum, while the other was a short and fleshy man in cheap, colorful pants and a quilted jacket. Akitada saw that he had a black eye and cut lip, and stopped.

He introduced himself and said, "I heard about your problem. What made you think your father came to this temple?"

The older brother took a folded note from his sleeve and handed it to Akitada with a bow. It was a short letter, addressed to "My elder son." In it, the father explained that he would not arrive until New Year's Day because he was making a stop at the Pure Water Temple. When Akitada looked up, the older brother said, "He never arrived. It isn't like him, sir. We always celebrate the New Year together."

Akitada returned the letter. "Could he have forgotten and made other plans?"

The younger brother cried, "Oh, our father is never forgetful. His mind is very sharp. He used to be a teacher." His brother tugged his sleeve, and the speaker blushed and hung his head.

Something about that exchange made Akitada take a chance. "Does the name Ueda mean anything to either of you?"

They looked at each other. "How did you know, sir?" the older brother asked. "It's a family secret. After my father left the palace, he went into trade and changed his name."

Akitada hid his surprise. He said, "Ah, that explains it. In that case, I too would like to speak to him. Will you let me know as soon as he turns up?"

They bowed, looking puzzled, and he left them.

At home he soaked his sore leg in a hot bath and considered the

problem. He let his mind move freely and in no particular order among the bits of information he had gathered. What had happened all those years ago to force a well-born and learned man to change his name and take up a trade? It must have been a serious offense. Why then had Sesshin put his trust in such a man? He next thought about the prince and his young woman and what would make them so careless with their correspondence. And he pondered the abbot's behavior. The man had been too quick to reject the possibility of murder and had refused to call in the authorities. Why?

Finally, he considered the missing letter, that had started this whole business. Since it had been offered for sale to the prince-bishop, the motive for the theft had been greed. Greed was a very common motive for crimes. The temple was begging for donations. And the Miyahara brothers might indeed be desperate for money.

Remembering the younger brother's black eye, Akitada decided that Tora, his trusty servant and assistant, could make inquiries. Satisfied with this decision, he closed his eyes and dozed. Images of crows and cats flitted in and out of his semiconscious state, leaving him with an oddly unpleasant feeling. He cut his bath short.

Tora accepted his assignment with pleasure and was gone all night. The next morning, Akitada was in his study, frowning at a tray of moon cakes left by his wife, a reminder that neither food nor human effort should go unappreciated, when Tora strolled in to make his report.

Yutaka, the older brother, was a well-liked and respected merchant who traded in paper and writing utensils. The younger, Hikaru, was a penniless artist. He was considered a misfit who drank too much, gambled, and periodically had to be bailed out of jail by his older brother. This year for the first time, the older brother had not been able to discharge all his debts and his suppliers refused him credit. The shop was on the point of closing. The younger brother's injuries seemed to be due to a drunken brawl.

Akitada pursed his lips. "So he is a wastrel and criminal, that younger brother. He is ruining the older one, and that means both have a motive for killing their father and taking the letter."

Tora shook his head. "Don't think so, sir. I liked Hikaru. He's a cheerful fellow. Likes women, wine shops, and good conversation." Tora grinned. "It was like old times, chatting him up. You owe me five pieces of silver, by the way."

Akitada glowered. "Five pieces of silver for a night of debauchery?"

And you a married man and father? How could you? I will not support the shocking lifestyle of your past."

Tora looked hurt. "An investigation involves certain expenses," he pointed out. "This fellow wouldn't have jabbered so freely if I hadn't put him in the right frame of mind. Turns out he got a lecture from his older brother and was pretty glum when I found him in his rented room."

Akitada relented a little. "Well, what did you get for my money?"

Tora helped himself to one of the sweet cakes. Chewing, he said, "Years ago, the old man ran afoul of the chancellor when he walloped one of the imperial princes. Seems the little bastard set a cat on fire."

"Ueda laid hands on an imperial child?" Akitada sat up. "It is a wonder he was not executed."

Tora nodded and eyed another cake. "These are delicious. Your lady is a treasure. Anyway, it was touch and go. Your friend, the bishop, put in a good word."

"I see." Before his ill-chosen remark about the moon cakes, Tora had said something that jogged a memory, but Akitada could not now recall what it had been. He said peevishly, "Stop stuffing yourself. In any case, none of it explains why the old man should have disappeared. I think I had better speak to the bishop again."

The bishop's secretary admitted him and asked eagerly, "Any news?" When Akitada shook his head, Shinnyo said, "A pity. He is worse today. Good news would have cheered him." Akitada felt guilty as, no doubt, was intended.

Sesshin's eyes were dull and his voice weaker. "Well?" he asked, while the secretary fussed around him with tea and an extra stole.

Akitada felt uncomfortable discussing the case with Shinnyo there but decided that the ailing bishop needed him. He reported all that had happened and what he and Tora had managed to learn. The bishop closed his eyes and compressed his lips when Akitada spoke of Hosshu's death.

A silence fell. Akitada grieved for the old prince and felt ashamed that he had failed. He said desperately, "Reverence, I shall need permission to speak to the young lady."

Sesshin did not reply for a long while, then nodded. "Yes. I shall arrange it. You may call on her father tomorrow morning."

**T**he home of the second prince's beloved stood among the residences of minor officials. Like Akitada's home, it had fallen on hard times. The overgrown garden looked tangled, and parts of the

compound were in ruins. Akitada did not know what to expect of the family. The prince's relationship with the young woman was very unclear to him. Was she a mere kept mistress or an innocent girl who had caught the eye of an heir to the throne? Perhaps her father's manner would explain the situation.

Lord Yoshida served as assistant director in the Bureau of Statistics and looked suited to his duties. A dull and proper man, he did not smile and behaved so correctly and spoke so properly that Akitada felt slovenly by comparison.

He had been informed of the reason for the visit and reluctantly permitted Akitada to speak to his daughter in his presence. It was impossible to guess what his feelings were about the affair between the girl and the imperial heir, but he was clearly upset that the letter should have disappeared from his house. He seemed to look at its loss as a personal failure.

After Yoshida sent for his daughter, Akitada had another surprise. The young woman came quickly. She was alone and carried a fan, which she used gracefully but without the pretense of shyness that causes great ladies to hide behind screens. Perhaps it was her youth or her father's lack of position, but Akitada found her forthright manner charming and unaffected. No wonder the second prince had lost his heart.

Her father said, "Lord Sugawara has come to help us. Please answer his questions, my dear."

The young woman bowed and gave Akitada a tiny smile over her fan. "I am honored, sir," she said in a pretty voice. "It concerns His Highness's letter, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Akitada, grateful for such directness, decided to be equally direct. "Its loss is causing some awkwardness for him. I wondered if you or your father could help me find the thief who took it, for it must have been taken from this house."

She looked at her father. "But it cannot have happened that way. Nobody but His Highness ever comes to my room."

Akitada blushed, embarrassed by such artless candor. The young woman's father cleared his throat. "It was no thief," he said stiffly. "The house is very well protected by guards. My daughter's letter must have been misplaced, and a copy must have fallen into the wrong hands elsewhere."

The daughter added quickly, "We have turned my rooms upside down."

Akitada assumed that the guards had been provided by the second prince, and accepted the fact that no outsider could have entered the compound to steal the letter. The possibility had been remote from the start. He asked, "Where did you keep your letters?"

"In a small box in a trunk with my gowns. At night, I take it out and sleep with it beside me."

Akitada's heart melted. Oh, to be so young and in love again! He thought of his own troubled marriage and grieved the loss of such happiness. Turning to her father, he asked, "Have any of your servants left the household recently?"

The other man looked taken aback. "Not recently, no. My daughter's nurse got married last year and now lives with her husband who is a brush maker. But that was months ago."

"Was it before or after this particular letter arrived?"

Father and daughter looked at each other. She said after a moment, "It was at the time, I think, but Kogimi would never—" She broke off, looking upset.

It was what Akitada had hoped to hear. He left with directions to the nurse's house.

The former nurse lived with her husband in a quarter of small shops, but her modest house was getting an addition and had new shutters across the front. Noting this, Akitada knocked on the door. A young maid opened and informed him that the master was away.

"Your mistress then," Akitada said firmly, causing the little maid to open the door wider so he could step inside. Instead of waiting, he followed her down a stone-flagged hallway, passing a kitchen on one side and a workroom on the other. The main living area was on a raised section in the back. Seeing the shiny boards and new tatami mats, Akitada slipped off his boots before stepping up.

The nurse sat beside a warming brazier, sewing some garment. She was hardly a blushing bride. Well past her first youth and broadfaced; she had a sturdy body that would soon go to fat.

She looked him over with shrewd eyes and bowed. "My husband's away," she said. "Can I give him a message?"

Having noted the signs of recent affluence, Akitada was satisfied that he had found his blackmailer. "No," he said. "My business is with you. It concerns the letter you stole and sold to His Reverence."

She dropped her sewing and gasped. "Wh—what can you mean, sir?"

"Come, come!" Akitada glowered down at her. "You know the letter was properly paid for—or do you deny that?"

In an agony of indecision, she looked about the room. "N—no. I mean . . . what is this about?"

"Don't play games with me," Akitada thundered. "You took the

gold but did not turn over the goods. You are a thief and will be arrested."

That shocked her. She wailed, "But I gave it to the old monk. A very old one in a straw cape. He took the letter away with him. I swear by the merciful Kannon." Getting on her knees, she knocked her head on the new tatami mats. "Dear heaven, how could I know he was a thief? He had the gold and asked for the letter. I'm just a simple woman. How could I know that there are such cheats in the world?"

Akitada poked her round figure with his foot. "Stop that wailing and tell me when this monk came here."

"It was the last day of the year. Before dusk. It was snowing."

"Can your husband confirm your story?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes, he can. We were both home the whole day waiting for him. That old villain of a monk read the letter, then he tucked it in his robe and walked off without so much as a thank you."

Giving her a hard look, Akitada did the same. He was angry at her duplicity and wracked his brain how the couple might be punished without involving the second prince. Preoccupied with his anger, he did not see the cat that suddenly streaked out of the kitchen and into his path. It collided with his boot, hissed and spat, then climbed to a shelf high on the wall, looking balefully down at him.

At that moment, Akitada knew what had niggled at his mind.

Cats.

The cat the imperial child set on fire and the cat at the bell tower. The cat at the bell tower had had that same baleful expression and had taken an altogether too persistent interest in the broken masonry.

Compressing his lips, Akitada hurried home for his horse.

At Kiyomizu-dera the young monk was again helping the gatekeeper, but today he greeted Akitada with reserve.

"I want another look at your bell tower," Akitada said, heading off in that direction.

The young monk ran after him. "Why?"

Akitada hurried up the steps, ignoring the warning twinge in his bad leg. "The cat," he said.

"The cat?"

"Yes. The cat was hanging about there. I want to know why."

"Mice, probably," said the monk. "We're in the forest here. The cat is wild, just like all the other animals. The abbot won't let us trap them."

"Quite right too," muttered Akitada. He was cold and miserable

and very uneasy about what he would find. "You are forbidden to take another creature's life."

He halted before the bell tower's damaged masonry and saw that it was as he had remembered. A part of the foundation had collapsed, and someone had stacked the loose stones up again without mortar. He bent to peer more closely at the rubble. Here, under the protection of the wide eaves, the ground was dry and dusty. The tracks of tiny feet passed in and out through small openings between the stones. Nearby were the larger tracks of the cat.

"You see? It's just mice," said the young monk, with a smirk.

Akitada sniffed. "What about the smell?"

The monk made a face. "Some of the mice must be dead."

But Akitada had begun to kick at the loose stones. Two large chunks rolled free, and the smell got stronger.

His companion pulled his sleeve. "Sir, please don't damage the bell tower."

Akitada shook him off. "Go, fetch the abbot." He returned to his demolition of the foundation.

The poorly covered section of the foundation soon collapsed, revealing a hole. And in the hole were a pair of human feet shod in worn straw sandals. Holding his breath, Akitada seized them by the ankles and pulled. The corpse of an elderly man in monk's robes slid out. He was dreadfully bruised about the face and head. Thin lines of blood had seeped from his nostrils and the swollen lips. In spite of this, the old man's expression was astonishingly peaceful and content.

As he bent over the body, Akitada got an uncomfortable feeling that he was not alone, but when he turned to look, he saw only the cat watching him from a distance. No doubt the animal felt he was trespassing on its territory. He quickly searched the body. No letter! He peered into the hole but found nothing there except mouse droppings.

This time, he was positive that he had unearthed the missing Ueda. Had the murderer beaten him to death for the letter and taken it away? If so, he had not made any use of it—yet. And that promised a very bad situation. By now the letter might be in the hands of men of such power that neither Akitada nor the ailing bishop could stop the fate that hung over the second prince.

And the killer was under the protection of men of such power that solving the crime would put Akitada and his family in danger.

The sound of footsteps woke him from his gloomy thoughts. The abbot hurried up and stared at the corpse. He gave Akitada a bitter look and groaned, "Not again. How is it that you keep coming here, bringing dead people with you?"



It would have been funny under different circumstances, but Akitada only said, "You don't know him?"

"I never saw him in my life." The abbot looked again and said, "Great Heaven. Can this be the father of those two fellows?"

"I believe so."

"Nothing to do with us," the abbot said quickly. "He is elderly and must have died naturally."

Akitada bit back an angry remark. Elderly men did not inflict such injuries on themselves and crawl under bell towers to die.

The abbot attempted an alternate explanation. "Or it was a family matter, as I suggested. In that case, I trust you will bring the deed home to the guilty. As for Hosshu, his accident has nothing whatsoever to do with this."

Akitada sighed. The condition of the bodies made it likely that both men had died the same night. That meant that Hosshu was killed because he had known something about Ueda's murder and posed a danger to the killer. But who was the killer? He cringed inwardly at the prospect of reporting utter failure to Sesshin.

But as he thought of the ailing bishop, a startling possibility crossed his mind.

The abbot waited a moment, but when Akitada made no comment, he left, muttering to himself and taking the young monk with him.

Akitada stood beside the corpse, thinking about the probable events of that night. When he was done, he nodded unhappily and knelt beside the body. He touched the wrinkled hands and begged forgiveness. Ueda had been a courageous man, a man who had taken great risks in his life to do the right thing. In the matter of the court cat, it had cost him his rank and profession, and now his determination to save the second prince had cost him his life. Akitada wished he could measure up to such an example, but even though he knew now who had murdered Ueda, he could not bring the man to justice.

As he looked at the poor battered face, Akitada wondered again at the dead man's peaceful expression. He glanced around. The murder must have happened here, near the bell tower, or perhaps inside it. He got up and walked around the building to the small door used by the monks who rang the great bell.

Someone had rung the bell for the New Year, but that night the ringing had been unusually ragged. And Hosshu had had a reputation of getting out of his chores. Yes, that explained it. Ueda had arrived, asking for lodging, and Hosshu, the lazy gatekeeper and designated bell ringer, had installed the visitor in the bell tower on condition that he ring the New Year's bell.

The door was unlocked. A narrow set of steps led to the ringing platform. The heavy wooden beam that was used to strike the great bell hung from the rafters. Akitada searched all the nooks and crannies of the interior, then turned his attention to the bell. It was very large, taking up most of the rest of the space. Its bottom rim was so close to the platform surface that a man would have to lie down to look inside. Ignoring the dust on the wooden boards, Akitada stretched himself out and peered up inside the bell.

He saw it immediately: a rectangular patch on the interior surface of the bell. Wriggling around to reach up, he touched paper and something sticky. He pulled back his fingers and smelled, then licked them. It was sweet bean paste like the filling in his wife's moon cakes. Someone had used bean paste to stick the paper to the metal. He reached up and peeled it off carefully, unfolding the paper in the dim light that fell through the openings. And saw that he had found the prince's letter.

His relief was almost dizzying. Smiling, he tucked the precious love note away and left the bell tower.

Outside, he brushed the dust off his clothes and remembered Ueda. His happiness faded. His assignment was complete and national disaster averted, but there would be no justice unless he could prove the murderer's guilt. And even then, there was little he could do. He returned to the body of the old man.

The cat was back also, peering cautiously into the opening. When it saw Akitada, it twitched its tail in irritation and stalked off. Akitada was well inclined toward the animal. It had helped him find Ueda and the letter.

In the dry dust under the tower were the tracks of many mice. They were what had brought the cat. But what had brought the mice?

He recalled the bean paste and quickly searched the dead man's robe again. In the folds near his thin waist, he found a few sticky crumbs. Of course. Hosshu must have given a New Year's cake to Ueda who had later used the paste to hide the letter, tucking the rest of the cake in his sleeve. That meant Ueda had suspected the killer. When the killer had demanded the letter, the old man had refused. In the ensuing struggle, Ueda had died. When his killer had not found the letter on him, he had hidden the body under the bell tower, hoping to delay the discovery until he was safely elsewhere. There the hungry mice had found the cake.

Yes, it must have happened that way, but it was not proof.

And what about Hosshu?

Impossible to know: the details of that encounter, but the

gatekeeper had probably surprised the murderer before or after the deed. More likely after, when the killer would have been searching for the precious letter. Having been seen and recognized by Hosshu, he had lured the monk to the veranda of the great hall and attacked him there. Hosshu had fought harder than the aged Ueda, but the killer had broken his neck and pitched him into the ravine.

A terrible night's work for the killer—who had ultimately failed to get what he wanted.

Akitada stayed only long enough to see Ueda laid out in one of the prayer halls and to leave silver for prayers to be said for his soul. Then he returned to the city, stopping first at the home of Ueda's older son to give him the sad news. The son had expected it but wept anyway.

Then he went to see Sesshin. The door was opened with a jerk by Shinnyo, who looked hollow eyed and jittery.

"Did you bring it?" he demanded.

Akitada did not answer but brushed past him and went in to Sesshin. The bishop looked a little stronger today, but his face was filled with anxiety.

"Any news?" he asked, putting down his string of beads.

In answer, Akitada handed him the letter.

Shinnyo joined him, his eyes on the small sheet of paper.

Sesshin opened the letter and looked at it. He said, "Oh, my dear Akitada, you have done it!" Heaving a sigh of deep satisfaction, he placed the sheet of paper on the glowing coals of his brazier. Shinnyo cried out. A flame shot up and it was gone.

Akitada saw that Shinnyo was staring at the smoking ashes, a hand half extended until he dropped it. "Where was it?" he asked dully. Catching Akitada's expression, he stepped back quickly.

Sesshin was too happy to notice his secretary's strange behavior. "Yes, where did you find it?"

Akitada's eyes did not leave the secretary. "Ueda brought the letter to Kiyomizu-dera, but he hid it inside the temple bell because he expected trouble."

Sesshin looked startled. "Trouble? Something happened to him?"

"He was killed, like the monk Hosshu."

"Oh, poor Ueda! What have I done?" The bishop gave a small shudder and reached for his beads.

Shinnyo still stood, looking at Akitada, his expression unreadable. Sesshin prayed, his words a gentle murmur, the beads clicking softly between his fingers. It was so quiet in the room that Akitada could hear the secretary's heavy breathing. At some

point, Shinnyo's stare faltered and his eyes roamed about the room like those of a cornered rat.

Eventually, Sesshin raised his head. "But how could such dreadful things have happened?" he asked. "Nobody knew about the meeting at the temple but Ueda and myself."

Shinnyo said harshly, "Any number of people might have known. His Highness, the prince, for example. Ueda's family. The blackmailer. Even the abbot. And the gatekeeper."

"Quite true," Akitada agreed. "But there was one other. And of all of them, only he knew enough, and only he was in the right place to kill for the letter."

Sesshin looked from Akitada to Shinnyo and back. "Who, Akitada? There is no one else."

Akitada let the silence lengthen, then asked, "Are you certain, Reverence, that you can trust your secretary?"

Shinnyo sucked in his breath. The bishop looked at him. His face became set and his eyes flashed. Good, thought Akitada, his old spirit is back.

Sesshin asked in a dangerously calm voice, "Did you do this, Shinnyo?"

"No, Reverence," the secretary said. "Of course not. How can you think such a thing? I knew nothing about the letter. You never told me—"

"You lie," the bishop said, his voice suddenly sharp. "You knew quite a lot. Simply by being around me, you found out about the blackmail. You admitted Ueda the night I asked him to buy the letter back. And that night at Kiyomizu-dera, I told you that I expected an important caller and to be on the lookout for him."

Shinnyo said, "You have no proof, and neither does Lord Sugawara."

It was true enough. Akitada and Sesshin looked at each other. "Heaven will not forget your deeds," Sesshin said angrily.

Shinnyo relaxed. He almost smiled. "What deeds? Two old men died accidentally. That is all anyone will ever know about it."

"Not quite, Shinnyo," Akitada said. "Since there is no letter and since His Reverence won't protect you, your other master—and we can guess who that is—will find ways to silence you."

When the truth of that sank in, Shinnyo-paled and took a step toward Akitada. "You meddling fool, I'll pay you back for this," he cried, then swung to face the bishop. "And you! I cared for your miserable body. I wrote your long, rambling letters. I ran your errands. I bore your dull conversation with patience all these months. How dare you threaten me!"

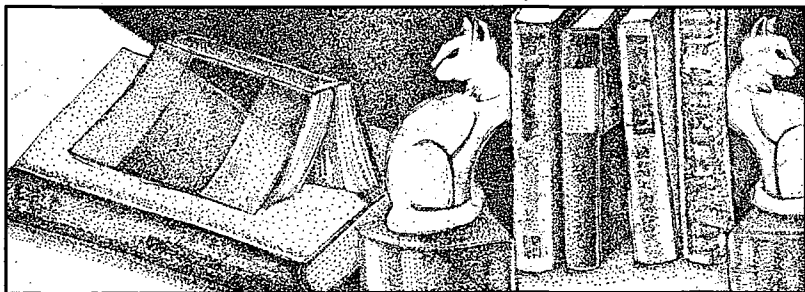
Akitada quickly stepped between them and locked eyes with

Shinnyo. The young monk was tall and strongly built and shaking with fury. Akitada thought for a moment that they were about to fight to the death, but the other stepped away, turned, and ran from the room. Doors slammed, then silence.

"Do you want me to go after him, Reverence?" Akitada asked, taking a deep breath.

"No." Sesshin sounded tired. "Thanks to you he failed to get the letter. And you are quite right about the chancellor. He does not tolerate such liabilities. Shinnyo will disappear. What matters is that you have saved the second prince. That is all I asked of you, my friend."

Sometime later, as Akitada walked homeward, he thought how praiseworthy were men like Ueda—and how estimable in their own way were cats and moon cakes. Yes, even moon cakes. Fate had a way of balancing things, and his wife's moon cakes, so lovingly prepared for him, deserved his appreciation. It was time to beg forgiveness and celebrate the season with his family. 🐾



# EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

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DENNIS RICHARD MURPHY

**T**he Riverside Rest and Retirement Home uses the Sports and Cards room for the funerals of their residents without next of kin. Morning card games are canceled while the staff collapses card tables and rearranges the padded folding chairs into five short rows with an aisle between them facing the billiards table. The table is covered with the piece of plywood and purple velvet cloth stored in the game closet beside the Crokinole board and discharged pool cues. The rotating reverend officials use the table as an altar at best, at worst a temporary support for an urn containing the ashes of the deceased. Today the ashes are Margaret's.

It was Margaret's turn first and not because of her gender—even chivalry takes a back seat to murder. She went first simply because she was the closest to natural death, if emphysema can be called natural. She sat on her scooter, hunched forward like a motocross racer, in the back of the white Chevrolet Safari van as it moved slowly down the suburban street. Too slowly for Harold.

"Crank the dang thing up, Art, or we'll look suspicious as all get out." Arthur ignored him. With the snow gone the subdivision looked different, more exposed than Arthur expected. Maybe it was nerves. The whole place seemed neglected. A sterile compost of pothole pebbles and last fall's leaves stuffed the ditches. The crimped drainage culverts produced pavement bumps at each driveway entrance. There were no sidewalks. In front of each house slouched slovenly saplings, barely supported by rusted wires and bent steel stakes, scrawny trunks exposed through split green garden hose. The recurrent trees made the dwellings appear more identical than they were, an anonymity enhanced by the lack of house numbers or personal identifiers on the homes. The overall effect was of a place unlivd in, a place abandoned, an entrepreneurial dream that died.

The naked gray galvanized poles at each intersection suggested

that street signs were once part of the plan, but they had been trashed by vandals or stolen by souvenir hunters. Harold checked the street map in his lap.

"Why the heck would anyone want to steal a sign that said Japonica Parkway?" he said, more a thought aloud than a question to Arthur. He could hear Margaret in the back singing along with her headphone music—"S'wonderful, s'marvelous"—in a muffled, reedy quaver. Bless her heart. "Streets used to be simple. Main Street and James Street, and John Street and Victoria Street, and Edward Street and—"

"How do they tell where the hell they belong when they come home at night?" Arthur interrupted. "Probably don't give a damn which house they go into, with all the wife swapping and goings on behind closed doors you hear about—"

"What's the number again, Margaret?" asked Harold, turning around as far as his bones and the seat belt would allow.

"What's that?" Margaret Owens slumped on her cherry red street scooter. A clear plastic tube ran from the regulator on the oxygen tanks mounted on the rear basket to the mask that covered her mouth and nose and which had nudged her thick glasses to an odd angle. The headphones led from her ears to her lap, where a white iPod rested on a white pillow wrapped in a zippered clear plastic bag. Reynolds's pillow. She fumbled to pull down her oxygen mask.

"What's the number?" said Harold, more to make sure Margaret was feeling all right than for the answer. They knew the answer.

"I told you. It's 2837 Locust Lane," she said, louder than necessary, loud enough to be heard over the music in her ears.

"I thought it was Locust Tree Lane," said Arthur.

"It is. Locust Tree Lane. 2387," yelled Margaret.

"I thought it was 2837," said Harold.

"It is," said Margaret, grabbing the handlebars of the scooter as the van turned sharply into the curb. "What the hell are you doin', Arthur?"

"You want me to drive?" asked Harold.

"I want to check the map," said Arthur. Harold passed it to him.

"We've been here a hundred times from Sunday," said Harold.

"It's further up the dang road."

Arthur Jenkins and Harold Hudecki sit together in the third row of the Sports and Cards room waiting for the service to begin, staring blankly at the inexpensive, ugly urn. They are avoiding the concentrated stares of two obvious cops, heels together, hands clasped behind their backs across the room, rocking on their fat,



shiny black shoes. The buttons of their similar tweedy jackets strain with their posture. The tie of the younger one hangs outside his jacket and seems stained with food.

No one sits in the first two rows. Behind the two old men three or four staff members, shiny white-nyloned knees turned toward each other, chat softly about their own problems, casting sporadic maternal glances toward Arthur and Harold as if they were children who'd lost a pet instead of grownups who'd avenged a ruined life.

"Where the hell are we?" asked Margaret, stretching her wrinkled neck smooth trying to see out the front windows. The rear windows were obscured by a webbed metal electric-lift platform folded against the panel doors. "We have to get there before the bugger gets home, you know. We can't be seen driving around the neighborhood in this thing looking like we don't know where the hell we are. We're pest controllers. Pest controllers know where they're going."

Signs for AAAABSOLUTELY BEST PEST CONTROL were painted on both sides of the van, with a smiling young man in bright orange coveralls, palm extended forward like a traffic cop's so that his hand was twice the size of his head. The script under the picture read: "For everything that bugs you," followed by a toll-free telephone number. Harold had borrowed the van from his sister's boy, Bob, who'd done well ridding the city and surrounding towns of everything from carpenter ants to cockroaches, from foundation termites to squirrels in the attic. Harold had mentioned several times that the disguise was apt for their mission, and now he said it again.

"An apt disguise," said Harold. Arthur was surprised at how nervous Harold seemed, calm for a man about to murder. Even Margaret seemed relaxed given her impending death, but Arthur was perspiring despite the cool spring day and the open driver's window. And he had to pee. He always had to pee lately, and he hated the lack of control. Embarrassment, mostly. It's why he was most comfortable with people his own age. They understood. They all had to pee too. There was nothing funny about it. He should stop denying it and get some of those adult diaper things Harold used. Can hardly see them under his baggy pants.

Some insipid classical organ piece plays on an over-adorned boom box perched on a folding chair. Margaret would have hated the music, thinks Harold. She'd have wanted "S'Wonderful," but the police had taken her iPod as evidence at the crime scene in

Reynolds's garage. As if that was evidence of anything. As if there was any evidence other than that which they'd planted. That young copper with the dirty tie is clever, though, thinks Arthur, the way he avoids eye contact except for ogling that new Russian nurse. She's a looker, that one. The older cop is wiser, more subdued, more at ease. He stares at his shoes most of the time, raising his eyes periodically to look over their heads. Arthur can smell the cigar smoke on his clothes from across the room.

"There," said Harold, pointing at the bent sign that said Locust Tree Lane.

"And there," said Arthur, as he saw the familiar house across the intersection, 2837. "Bingo."

"What's that?" shouted Margaret from the back.

"Bingo," said Harold.

"Bingo?" said Margaret. "What's Bingo? What the hell does Bingo have to do with . . . ?"

"We found it," said Arthur. "Hang on tight." He pulled over to the narrow graveled shoulder just past the driveway, stopped, and glanced at his watch.

"Of course we found it. I told you where it was," said Margaret. It was two o'clock and Reynolds was due home at four thirty from his bridge game. Like every Thursday.

"Guide me in, will you, Bob?" Harold stepped cautiously down from the cab in his bright orange coveralls with BOB embroidered in script on a patch over the right breast. Arthur's suit said DAVE. Both coveralls had large embroidered discs on the back that screamed AAAABSOLUTELY BEST PEST CONTROL. Maybe it was the loud uniforms that scared the insects and animals away. Why would anyone hire these people and their truck to announce to the whole neighborhood that they had problems with vermin?

It hadn't been difficult to find Reynolds. Sixty years later, Margaret, like any good secretary, still remembered his full name and his wife's name, their anniversaries and their kid's names, and everyone's birthdays. The insurance company was still in business, run by a new generation of salespeople and managers, but there's always someone in charge of the glorious past, and when Margaret couldn't bring herself to call, Arthur had posed as Reynolds's long-lost brother-in-law and found his address through the pension fund. No one was suspicious. Old people aren't frightening to the young, or threatening, or even interesting, so why would one old guy searching for another old guy raise any eyebrows? It didn't.

Reynolds and his wife had moved to the ranch-style bungalow

when he retired. The kids were spread out across the country. When his wife Moira died, he stayed there by himself. He was set in his ways, grocery shopping at the same time every week, watering his immaculate lawn from seven to nine each night, right through the water restrictions. He had no pets. His children seldom visited. He did not travel. He seemed content at home, fixing things and keeping things neat. He played contract bridge and drank tea in the city on Thursdays from one thirty to four thirty. It took him forty-five minutes to drive home. He always backed into his garage.

Harold/Bob waved his forearms straight back toward his shoulders as if he had a red-capped flashlight in each hand like he used on the tarmac at Richard H. Grinnell International. Arthur/Dave watched the oversized rearview side mirrors as he backed up to the garage door. He could hear Margaret fidgeting with something, swearing at some problem in the back of the van. Harold/Bob crossed his forearms in an X to signal a stop, leaving enough room for the rear panel doors to open and the lift to fold down. Arthur looked up and down the street as he put the transmission in park. Empty. Maybe nobody lived here. Maybe that's why there were no street names or sidewalks or house numbers. It looked like a derelict film set for "Leave It to Beaver."

The music ends. No one else is showing up. Most are probably upset that the damned funeral interferes with the card games, thinks Harold. The two policemen look toward the door, and Arthur leans toward his seatmate.

"Hell with 'em, Hal," says Arthur, under his breath. "Don't look at 'em. Don't give 'em the time of day. Ignore 'em." They can suspect all they want. They can even jail one old man with terminal cancer or another whose series of coronaries will continue until the last one kills him. "Hell with 'em, Hal. Don't let 'em get to you. That's what they want."

Reynolds's house was a single story, with a double garage linked to the main house by a long breezeway, a screened-in passage with a sitting area open to the front and back yards. The breezeway made the place look longer and larger than it was. The driveway had been recently topped with fresh black tar, including the small river rocks that lined it. The wooden frames and quarter-round moldings on the breezeway screens wore a fresh glossy coat of forest green enamel, with a minimum of spill on the fiberglass screening. The place was cared for by someone with little else to do.

Harold pulled on a pair of bright yellow rubber gloves, opened the door on the passenger side of the van, and began removing rolls of large hoses with red plastic connectors on the ends. Arthur opened the rear doors and pulled down the electric lift platform.

Margaret had managed to turn her scooter to face the rear, so that when Arthur opened the doors wide she faced out, glasses askew, rasping, oxygen mask hanging loosely around her neck with its plastic tubing inextricably snarled with the headphone wires. She was pulling at the cables, swearing, trying to untangle them. From his low angle, Arthur saw her thick laced hiking boots and where her thick stockings ended in uneven rolls around blue-white calves. Margaret blinked several times, relieved to see light again. She smelled like sweat and chemicals and human gas. Like mornings in prison. Arthur knew that feeling. He knew all about jail. He'd just pushed it from his mind, written it off as unjustified loss—until The Old Hat Gang came together, until Lizzie Parsons hadn't shown up for Euchre.

There was a random rhythm of arriving ambulances at Riverside, screeching into the circular drive quickly and noisily with intent, then leaving laconically, in no rush at all, attendants chatting about increasing union dues or children. A partner who ruined your lone hand with the wrong lead one day wasn't around the next. Like in prison, thought Arthur, it stopped you from making too many close friends. The morning Lizzie Parsons didn't show up, he and Harold and Margaret had started talking about their lives instead of playing three handed. That was how all this started.

After they dismissed their regrets for others, they talked about their own. The conversation became serious, confessional, a surprise to all of them. Arthur dealt cards for the order—spades were trump, Jack tells all first; left Bower goes second. Margaret had to nag Harold to talk about his invention and the thieving airport manager who had built a wealthy and happy life around the proceeds. At least it looked happy with that flashy car and flashy wife in the papers. Lived up in the Bundle, had a cottage worth more'n any house Harold ever owned.

Arthur admitted to spending the best years of his life in prison charged with fraud, until new evidence proved him to be the innocent he'd insisted he was for so many years. In jail he'd become inured to order, comfortable with regulation, so he'd rejected independence for Riverside, where he festered with resentment for the time he served instead of the crooked phony who'd since built a life in politics.

It was Harold who came up with "The Old Hat Gang." He was always saying the same words and phrases over and over: "good old days," "dang kids," "copasetic," "right-o," "bird in the hand." He used "Old Hat" as a compliment to the days when life was easier and less self-conscious, when justice was simple and revenge rewarded.

What are the damn cops doing here anyway? Arthur sits facing the billiards table altar with his legs straight out and arms folded across his belly. The evidence to convict Reynolds is obvious, he thinks. The police have already jailed him for killing Margaret. Two cops in a cruiser found her dead right in his garage workshop, tipped off by a 911 call from a pay phone. Reynolds denied knowing her until they found the series of her pleading letters under the socks in his dresser drawer. The letters were Harold's idea, tangible evidence of a treachery that had ruined young Margaret Owens's life. The police found strands of Reynolds's hair on her scarf and skirt, traces of his saliva on the pillow he'd used to smother her—a pillow identical to the one on his bed. When the forensic laboratory compared the evidence with hair from his brush and saliva from a cigarette in his car ashtray, the man was doomed to a hell worse than the one to which he'd condemned Margaret. That's the point, isn't it? That's what The Old Hat Gang is all about.

Arthur heard Harold whistling as he hooked up the hoses to each other. None of them knew what they were for, but they'd rehearsed every move of the entry and what Harold called "doing business." Looking busy and professional was an important part of the plan, he said. People only noticed the unexpected. It was why white vans and uniforms and old people were invisible, why people ignored them, didn't even notice them. Margaret gave up on her tangled wires, maneuvered her scooter out onto the platform, and Arthur pressed the hydraulic down button.

"How-dee there," said the mailman. Harold jumped a foot off the ground, dropped the hoses, and clamped his hand to his heart.

"Sorry," said the mailman.

"Oh no," said Harold, blowing gusts of air out his mouth like a swimmer waiting for the starting gun. What a lousy time this would be for him to die. "No problem." Puff. "Gee whiz." Puff, puff. "Scared me all to heck is all. I was in a world of my own, just trying to, uh . . ." He gestured toward the hoses and connectors.

"I could see that," said the mailman. "Didn't mean to give you no fright." At the rear of the van, Arthur pressed the stop button

on the lift and put his finger over his lips, signaling Margaret to be quiet. He was dripping with nervous sweat on his brow and inside his coveralls. He punched up, and Margaret rose a few inches to the height of the van floor. Arthur opened the passenger-side rear panel door square to the van so the mailman couldn't see around the corner, then looked out and nodded hello.

"Hi there," said the mailman. "Nice day?" Arthur nodded tersely.

"Nice enough." He pretended to be terribly busy dealing with something in the back of the van.

"Fire ants, Bob?" said the mailman.

"Sorry?" said Harold.

"Old Reynolds got fire ants?" said the mailman. "People 'round here always complainin' 'bout fire ants."

"Oh yeah. Fire ants. Lot of 'em," said Harold. He began undoing the hoses he'd attached, staring at the color-coded connectors, blowing on them, rubbing them on his coveralls as if they were plugged or faulty. Doing business. "Hordes of 'em. Dangerous things, fire ants."

"Well I dunno about dangerous," said the mailman, "but they sure can sting a bit if you step on 'em barefoot."

"That's for dang sure," said Harold. "Barefoot's real bad."

"You ready yet, Bob?" said Arthur, grimacing. Margaret had released some sour gas. He couldn't blame her. She must be on edge. It wasn't a big deal like when you were a kid and everybody giggled when you farted in class. Christ, everyone he knew had gas now, or peed themselves a little, or couldn't pull their socks up without help, or couldn't eat some things because it made them belch or fart more than other stuff did. It was just part of getting old, not the nicest part, but part of it just the same. It wasn't brain damage or anything. Slow bodies didn't make for slow minds, that's for sure. The Old Hat Gang knew that, but being old was part of their cover.

"Well, I'll be on my way," said the mailman. He looked at the letters in his hand and shuffled through them, hesitating to leave a rare audience in this ghost town. "Another pension check," he said. "Reynolds does all right by them." He looked at another and shook his head. "Darn book clubs. Once you join 'em they hold on, don't they? Pay their postage, though. Can't fault 'em there. Make you spend another stamp just to tell 'em you don't want a book. Good for the mail business, book clubs. Not like e-mail." He walked up the front path to the mailbox and put the letters in. Arthur stepped between the van door and the garage, blocking any possible view of Margaret. It wouldn't be easy to explain what a flatulent elderly woman on a bright red scooter, wearing an oxygen

mask and an iPod, was doing in the back of a pest control van. He got the giggles. The mailman waved and continued across the grass to the next house, talking to himself. Harold waved back and started reattaching the hoses, frowning at the rear of the van where Arthur stifled his laughs. Still smiling, Arthur lowered Margaret to ground level. This was the most critical part, getting Margaret into position. The mailman hadn't been part of the plan. Had they missed anything else? How was the time?

Around the card table by the garden window, set apart from the other players, Margaret told them how Reynolds had treated her initially like a pet rather than a secretary. She hadn't minded that so much, she said. He wasn't bad looking, and she prided herself on her sense of humor. Then he'd started holding onto her hand a bit longer than necessary, touching her, giving her neck massages when she was trying to type his letters, pushing his fingers down her front a bit farther than was proper, even undoing a button once. He would watch her every move, then wink at her when she noticed. Begging collusion. One night he insisted she stay behind for extra work. That night he raped her, and the next day he fired her. She lost her young man over it. He thought she was dirty when she told him. She thought she was dirty. She lost all respect for herself and for life. It seemed a curse that she was still alive sixty years later, puffed with compounded hate, ready for revenge.

Maybe the reason breezeways weren't so popular anymore, thought Harold, was that anyone could break into them. The spring roller opened with a twang and slapped closed with a satisfying *thwack*, a sound that made him think fleetingly about his childhood summers, about his father telling him not to give the chickens names, not to offer them that respect, not to personalize tomorrow's supper. He brushed the thought aside. He had more and more mental flash cards about his childhood lately. More like still pictures than miniature movies. He tried to retain them, to examine one to see if it was black and white or in color, to see what the people looked like, but they wouldn't stay with him long enough. The breezeway floor was covered in green indoor-outdoor carpeting, and the aluminum chaise and folding chair had been rewebbed in orange and white plastic strips. This Reynolds guy sure took care of things, Harold thought. Was that too much respect? Was that giving the chicken a name? No matter. His neatness couldn't make up for what the dang fella done to Margaret.

Inside the breezeway, he turned right and opened the side door of the garage with the copy of the key Arthur had made by the



nice young lady who ran the Wednesday afternoon craft classes. When she'd asked Arthur what it opened, he'd said it was the key to his heart and she'd laughed. A week later she brought it and its twin back and refused any money. The original, wiped clean of fingerprints, was back under the smooth rock in the planter by the breezeway door.

This was a real retired man's garage. Harold envied Reynolds this garage. The near half was actually used for his car. There was a yellow tennis ball hanging from a string to show him where to stop when he backed in. He always backed in. The far half was a workshop. Both shared a spotless, gray-painted concrete floor. Lawn tools hung on proper hooks all around the parking half, and on the far side, electric woodworking tools on gray-painted plywood cabinets with casters were squared away on black rectangular outlines painted on the floor. Against the far wall was an immaculate workbench with suspended pegboard panels covered with black-ink silhouettes of tools, with the correct tool inside every silhouette. A place for everything.

Arthur's question had been the obvious one to the Old Hat Gang: "What are we going to do about it?" The simplicity of the question stunned them, including Arthur. It was as if none of them had asked themselves that question before, or if they had, their answer had been "nothing"; there was nothing anyone could do. No one else would listen. No one else would hear. They would be relegated to some B-list of losers, of whiners who bored others with their wounded stories of what could have been. But with the three of them talking, planning together, anything seemed possible. The awful power held by those who had hurt them, the dismissive force that had seemed unassailable, became porous when attacked by the group.

They had good minds, if not good bodies. They had time, limited only by inevitable death. They had intent, if only to right wrongs before they died. They had each other and the odd combination of respectability, invisibility, and determination that came with old age. They could wear that cloak of others' indifference like a shield from suspicion. They had the perfect prescription for vengeance—a passionate desire to right wrongs with a carelessness for consequence. When Margaret's emphysema took a severe turn, they found the commitment to act.

Harold pressed a button and the well-lubricated garage door rose silently, eerily, he thought, letting in the dull afternoon light and Margaret, who gunned her scooter and entered immediately.

She looked determined. This was it for her. Arthur stayed outside by the van, not meeting Harold's eyes, raising the lift and folding it back inside the van, closing the rear doors, disconnecting hoses, and stuffing them back inside the side entrance. Doing business. Harold closed the garage door and helped Margaret back in between the table saw and the workbench. She smelled stale but that was probably nerves. Or maybe it was his smell, thought Harold. He was feeling anxious too, not about what he had to do, just about doing it well. Margaret had been waiting her lifetime for this. Maybe the smell was determination.

It was Margaret who had changed the rules from those of simple revenge. It was Margaret who said "killin's too damn good for 'im." It was Margaret who offered herself as sacrifice. "Let him live with regret too."

From different rental cars they'd watched him for three weeks every day, then three more Thursdays. They'd broken into his breezeway, his garage, and his house. They'd copied his keys, stolen his pillow, captured an unfinished glass of water, pulled hairs from his brush, and stuffed the pack of letters in his dresser drawer. There were days when Margaret was so ill she couldn't participate in the drive-bys or the stakeouts, and other days when she couldn't attend the meetings. Harold missed a couple in a row because of tests, and Arthur's last attack hadn't helped him keep the agenda. But the fact there were three of them erased the inequities of individual energy and health and attendance. Reynolds's "comeuppance" (Harold's word again) became Arthur's and Harold's goal, indistinguishable from Margaret's retribution.

Harold pulled the string that turned on the fluorescent light suspended over the workbench. The rubber gloves made his hands sweat, but he helped her untangle the headphone cord from the oxygen tube and placed the tiny buds back in her ears. While she fiddled with the iPod to choose her song, he took the pillow from her lap, unzipped the clear plastic cover. "S'marvelous . . ." she sang tunelessly, as if he wasn't there. He straightened her scarf and patted her on the back as if to ask if she was ready. She was nodding, perhaps to the mute question, maybe to the music. Head down, eyes raised, she watched him over her thick glasses as he approached, then gave him a thumbs up and a grim smile. He gently removed her oxygen mask and lowered it, fondly, bending down to kiss her cheek. He heard the oxygen hissing and felt a wet tear on his face. Hers or his? He held the pillow over her. She didn't struggle, just slumped, then twitched automatically at the

end when the body obstinately argued for life. He placed the pillow on her handlebars and lowered her head gently onto it, face down as if she were napping. He took two yellow-brown plastic pill bottles and tweezers from his left chest pocket and delicately laid single hairs on her scarf and skirt from one, drizzled drops of clear liquid on the pillow from the other. Harold jumped when Arthur rapped twice on the garage door, signaling he was ready to go. He placed the tweezers, the rubber gloves, and the pill bottles in the clear plastic pillow cover and zipped it up.

"Huh?" Arthur shakes his head awake. "What?" Harold nods toward the young minister standing beside the billiards table. Arthur smacks his lips. His mouth is dry. He pulls in his legs, sits up straight, and folds his hands in his lap as the young minister begins to speak about Margaret as if he'd known her, something about sacrifice.

"Bunk," says Harold. Did he say it out loud? Both policemen look their way, frowning. Cops attend funerals to see if the killers come to gloat. Harold read that somewhere. They hadn't a shred of evidence, thought Arthur. Did they? Harold shakes his head as if he's heard.

Arthur could see the lights on Locust Tree Lane through the leafless trees between the lots. They had pulled into the rutted driveway of a lot no one had purchased a block south of Reynolds's. A rotting stake with a dull orange tip, once identifying some utility, lay uprooted near the road, almost buried among the second-growth maples and small balsams reclaiming their territory. Arthur turned the van lights off and said an automatic "sorry" before he farted and rolled down his window. Harold grunted an understanding, eyes on Reynolds's garage doors, mind on Margaret. With the window down and the dark coming on, they could hear the crickets in the clearing singing, regretting nothing but the night. Reynolds was due home any minute. Lights were on over the garage door and front porch. Arthur checked his watch. It was 5:17 p.m. Reynolds had them set on a timer to come on at exactly 5:15 every day.

Arthur got out and peed in the ditch beside the rutted driveway. Damned coffee ran through you like a caffeine creek. He strained to see the lot in the dark. One day a family might live on this spot, might try to build a life without regrets, or might hide their regrets behind an inability to address them, might grow old without resolving them.

Harold whistled, waving Arthur back into the van. It was

Reynolds. They watched through the trees as he backed up into his clean black driveway. The highly waxed Taurus wagon reflected the lights of the porch and garage. He hesitated for a moment and Arthur's stomach clutched, wondering if he'd seen something that suggested people had visited his home. The garage door opened silently, like the maw of a whale, and Reynolds backed in quickly, eye on the tennis ball in the rearview mirror like a thousand times before, closing the door with the remote before he even stopped his car. For the last time in his life.

Arthur and Harold waited, teeth clenched, breathing suspended. Harold crossed himself, then looked surprised he'd done it. Arthur stared, unblinking, at the breezeway until Reynolds ran in panic from the garage to his house. Harold smiled. Arthur started the van. They drove for six minutes and twenty seconds to the pay telephone behind Daley's Fried Chicken in Eastbank Mall where they called 911. Harold tossed the plastic bag into the dumpster, just like they'd rehearsed.

Margaret would have left long ago if she could've. The young minister bleats about valleys and shadows of death. Arthur steals a glance at the cops. They know, each in their way, he thinks. The young one with the dirty tie suspects murder, and suspicion infatuates him. The wise one suspects justice, and murder doesn't bother him at all.

Harold looks gray, thinks Arthur. Sickly. Good thing his turn is next. 🐦

# TAKEDOWN

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RICHARD F. MCGONEGAL

**M**aybe if they hadn't stuffed the wadded washcloth in my mouth, I could have let it go.

Or maybe not. The crime—clever in its simplicity—fascinated me.

But already I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning, when the two men entered.

The mid October evening air was brisk but hardly chilling. I was sitting alone at the folding table in the theater lobby, staring at a chessboard that was largely empty, attempting to solve a mate-in-three-moves problem from *The Manual of Chess* by former world chess champion Emanuel Lasker.

I'm not much of a thespian—or athlete or car guy, for that matter—but I like chess, and I'm pretty good. One way our high school chess club raises money is by selling tickets and bottled water during school plays. The theater department gets the proceeds from ticket sales, and we get the profits from selling water, which at a buck a bottle can add up quickly.

The performance was opening night of the season's biggest production, the annual musical, but the job was easy; the only busy periods were before curtain and during intermission. Aside from that, I seldom saw audience members unless they needed a bathroom break.

Amid the background drone of orchestra and applause, and absorbed in the Lasker puzzle, I failed to notice the two guys until they were standing beside the table. I looked up from their tan coveralls and focused on their black ski masks, and I was pretty sure at that moment that I was in trouble. In fact, I think I may have muttered something like "Oh, shit."

As I scrambled to my feet, the taller of the men seized my upper arm in a viselike grip. "Don't scream. Don't shout," he warned. "Everything's gonna be fine." He paused and stared at me. My expression must have convinced him I was too frightened to be anything but docile. "Let's you and me walk to that office over there," he instructed.

"You know," I said, "there's a couple hundred people right through those—"

"Walk. Don't talk," he interrupted.

As I walked, I contemplated how Emanuel Lasker would study not only the chessboard but also the demeanor and gestures of his opponents.

I glanced back and caught a glimpse of the shorter man tucking both the metal cashbox with the ticket receipts and the cash bag containing the water proceeds under his arm. As he hurried to the outer doors, his only notable aspect was his perfect posture.

"Open it," the taller man ordered when we reached the office door. I continued following his instruction. I put my hands behind my back and allowed my wrists to be duct taped together, then sat on the floor, where my ankles similarly were bound together with duct tape.

The man then produced a white washcloth from a pocket, wadded it, and shoved it unceremoniously into my mouth. He finished by ripping and pressing a rectangle of duct tape over my lips.

Suitably bound, gagged, and humiliated, I watched the taller man rise from his crouch.

He paused momentarily and gazed down at me through the eyeholes in his ski mask, almost as if admiring his work. Then he left, closing the door behind him.

A few weeks later, I was walking to class with Albert, a fellow chess club member, when a voice from behind called: "Hey, Roly."

I wasn't fond of the nickname, Roly, which had been pinned on me in grade school. It was a derivative of my given name, Roland, and of roly-poly, which I was before my pubescent metamorphosis into a lanky, gangly teenager.

I'm aware of the stereotypical chess club member, and unfortunately, that characterization mostly applies to me. I'm smart, nerdy, and uncoordinated. I do not, however, fasten the top button of my shirt. I wear glasses, but the bridge is not taped, and although I carry a few pens in my shirt pocket, I do not wear a plastic pocket protector.

Albert defies even the nerdy stereotype. Like Winnie the Pooh's self-assessment, he is "short and round," with large ears and a habit of wrinkling his nose like a mouse who has just inhaled a whiff of Muenster cheese.

In contrast, Gary is handsome, athletic, and poised. He is a state wrestling champion and captain of our team; he rules the "cool" table at lunch and dates Misty Magarelli, the most drooled-after girl in school.

He rarely had much to do with us, but I wasn't entirely surprised when he hailed me in the hallway.

"Hey, Gary," I greeted as he neared. "How's your mom?"

"You heard, huh?" he asked, referring to the weekend robbery, which had occurred two weeks after the one involving me. "She's okay. The doctor said head wounds bleed a lot and often look worse than they are. Mostly, she's angry and upset. She feels responsible for the money that was stolen."

"Welcome to my world," I replied. In the periphery of my vision, I watched Albert fidget.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Gary said. "I thought maybe we could compare notes. See what's similar."

"Yeah, sure," I agreed.

A bell resounded, heralding two minutes until the next class.

"We're gonna be late," Albert chastised.

"Can you meet me in the cafeteria after school?" Gary asked.

"Sure," I said.

I was staring at an open textbook, absorbed in a trigonometry problem, when Gary entered the largely empty cafeteria and sat across from me at the lunch table. Aside from us, the only people remaining in the large room were a few of the lunch ladies, who were nearly finished unloading the industrial dishwasher, and Eddie the janitor, who was pushing a wide dust mop in the aisles.

"So," Gary said, leaning in across the table, "you were the only witness to your robbery, right?"

"Right," I affirmed.

"The guys who are doin' this strike me as pretty crafty," he observed.

"I'll say," I agreed. "I've been thinking about it. Instead of high-risk places like banks or convenience stores with alarms, surveillance cameras, and employees who are trained to remain calm and get descriptions, these guys are taking down the opposite. Look at me and your mom. We were alone and hardly trained to deal with masked, perhaps armed, assailants. I was scared out of my wits. And look at all the money they got. Probably more than most store cash registers. And it was all small unmarked bills—ready to spend."

Gary pondered my analysis, then leaned back in his chair. "You and Albert are pretty tight, huh?"

"Well, we're both in the chess club and we take—" I began before interrupting myself. "What are you suggesting?"

Gary shrugged. "I'm not suggesting anything," he protested.

"I think I see where this is going," I said. "This was one of the



first things the police questioned me about. Was I the inside man on an inside job?" I paused. "Sure, it would have been easy for me to have a buddy tape me up, take the money, then split it later. That would be pretty slick, but there's one problem. I wouldn't steal from my own club."

I stood abruptly and slammed closed my trigonometry textbook. "I'm outta here."

I left the cafeteria and was striding down the hallway when Gary caught up with me.

"Look," he said, walking beside me. "I'm sorry. Okay. I just had to know if you were involved before I could trust you."

I kept walking.

"Those guys hurt my mom," Gary said. "I want 'em caught."

"So do I," I said, without breaking stride.

"Then let's work together. Okay?"

I stopped.

"Okay?" he repeated.

I shrugged, releasing a significant amount of pique.

"C'mon," Gary pleaded. "No hard feelings? Let me buy you a burger or somethin' and we'll talk."

"Okay," I agreed.

Every town has a popular hangout for teenagers when the school day is done. In our town it's Millie's Diner.

Gary and I sat across from each other in a booth, in plain sight of classmates gawking and wondering what circumstances had brought together a chess geek and popular jock.

Ronnie Starke, a marginal student who had graduated, barely, a year ahead of us, sauntered over to take our orders.

I went with a cheeseburger, fries, and a Coke; Gary, who was trying to make his weight class for the upcoming wrestling season, was content with water.

After Ronnie left us, we shared what we knew about the two robberies.

I went first and mostly had finished when the food arrived. While I chowed down, Gary related the incident involving his mother.

Gary's mom and another West Elementary School PTA officer, Clara Wilcox, were manning the ticket table for the school's annual fall carnival. Their task involved sitting at a table in the main entryway, selling tickets to eager youngsters who then proceeded to the classrooms in hopes of winning prizes at a variety of games—miniature golf, beanbag toss, cake walk, etc.

About thirty minutes after the carnival began and the line for

tickets had subsided, Clara excused herself to use the restroom.

Moments later two men approached Gary's mom from behind. She described them as white males, one about three inches taller than the other. Both wore tan coats, blue jeans, and clear plastic gloves, and both had nylon stockings pulled over their faces.

Despite her struggles, the two men dragged her to a nearby classroom, where they attempted to tape her wrists and ankles and to force a wadded washcloth into her mouth. She resisted and the trio eventually collapsed in a heap.

As they fell down together, Gary's mom banged her forehead against the corner of a desk. Her last recollection was the sight of her blood saturating the carpet. Then everything went blank until she was revived by emergency medical technicians, surrounded by a group of concerned PTA parents.

When she became lucid enough to ask about the proceeds from the ticket sales, she was told the cashbox was missing. Further inquiry revealed that no one else recalled seeing the two men she described.

I summoned Ronnie for a refill of Coke while I pondered Gary's narrative.

"Okay," I said. "Let's consider what's similar. Two white guys, one taller than the other. Could your mom estimate the height of either one?"

"She guessed the taller one was about six feet, maybe more. The shorter guy she figured was five nine, maybe five ten."

"That sounds about right," I affirmed. "Your mom said both wore clear plastic gloves and had stockings over their faces?"

"Uh huh."

"My guys wore ski masks and black gloves, but they came from outside and weren't expecting to encounter anyone but me. I'm guessing the guys who robbed your mom came through a side door and had the gloves and stockings stashed in their pockets. They probably blended in like a couple of dads or big brothers killing time."

Gary nodded agreement.

"What about the duct tape?"

"Standard gray duct tape."

"And the washcloth?"

"Police found it on the carpet," Gary answered. "A plain, white terrycloth washcloth. The tag had been cut out of it."

A silence ensued as we contemplated our shared information.

"That really isn't much to go on," Gary conceded.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"So what's next?"

I shrugged. "I wish I knew."

Gary was only a few people behind me in the lunch line, so I waited, holding my plastic tray laden with food.

"Hey Roly, what's up?" Gary said, when he exited the line with a contrasting meager amount of food on his tray.

"I've been thinking about the two guys," I said. "Plus—"

"C'mon," he interrupted, gesturing toward his customary lunch table.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. What about—"

"C'mon," he insisted. "I wanna hear what you've got to say."

Reluctantly, I followed him to the proverbial "cool" table. As I set down my tray and pulled out a chair beside Gary, I offered an apologetic smile to the trio seated across from me. They included the rangy Ryan Paulson, singles and doubles tennis standout; the gigantic Frank Sansone, one of Gary's fellow wrestlers, a heavy-weight; and the muscular Dave Ormosi, baseball slugger and center fielder.

"Hey, Gary, what's goin' on?" Frank inquired, tilting his head in my direction.

"Roly's here as my guest," Gary replied. "You got a problem with that?"

"Maybe," Frank answered.

"Then maybe you can start sittin' someplace else."

Frank swiveled his gaze to Ryan, who shrugged and pushed food around his plate, to Dave, who continued gobbling his lunch. Unable to generate support, Frank gave me a menacing stare, then pushed his chair back from the table. "I was pretty much finished anyway," he said. He arose and left.

"So," Gary prompted, turning to me.

"I've been thinking about the two guys," I said.

"And?"

"And I think they know the schools. My guess is they're students or recent graduates."

"Or recent dropouts," Gary added.

"Maybe," I said. "It's just that they seem pretty familiar with the schools and what activities are going on. Plus, the guys who robbed me didn't seem that much older."

"Makes sense," Gary said. He paused, then added: "Still a big pool of suspects."

"I also did some checking on the washcloths."

"Washcloths?" Dave interjected.

"The robbers stuffed a washcloth in Roly's mouth and tried to do the same with my mom," Gary explained.

"Oh," Dave said. He returned his attention to his lunch.

"So," Gary said. "Any luck?"

"Zero," I answered. "The police believe the washcloths are identical, but they're so nondescript that, without the tags, they'd be difficult to trace to a specific store. Still, I went to some of the bigger discounters to see what I could find out. They gave me some song-and-dance about needing to know the purchase date and approximate time before they could determine which register was used and what checker was on duty. Basically, they—"

"I'd steal 'em," Dave interrupted. "If I were gonna use washcloths in a robbery, I'd wouldn't buy 'em, I'd steal 'em."

I shrugged. "Either way, it's a dead end."

"So we're pretty much back at square one," Gary said, his frustration apparent.

"Pretty much," I agreed.

I was seated near the top row at the far end of the packed bleachers, a vantage point that provided an excellent view of the homecoming football game and, when I looked over my left shoulder, the ticket booth at the stadium gate.

I was watching our team's first series of downs when my cell phone rang.

"Yeah," I answered before it rang a second time.

"Hey, Roly," Gary said. "Take a look."

I turned around. Absent clues to pursue, Gary and I decided our best strategy was to stake out the next likely target—the homecoming game. We decided I would find a spot where I could observe the front gate but not be noticed easily. Because Gary had never encountered the robbers face to face, or face to mask, he would wander the perimeter, watch for likely suspects, and alert me by cell phone.

"The guy and the gal?" I inquired, focusing on the couple who tarried outside the gate.

"Yeah," Gary affirmed. "They're just kinda stalled there—lookin' around."

The girl was shorter than the guy. The shorter guy in the robberies never spoke. Both Gary's mom and I had assumed the shorter robber was male. I stared at the couple and wondered.

They fidgeted. They looked around. We waited.

"Could be," I said finally, just to be saying something into the phone clutched to my ear. I shivered against the breeze that was more pronounced in the upper reaches of the bleachers. The late October evening was seasonably cool but not unpleasant football

weather. I noticed many fans had their hoods up and blankets shrouding their laps.

What seemed a long time but was probably only a few minutes elapsed before the suspicious couple was joined by another couple. The two guys bought tickets and all four entered and found seats in the lower bleachers.

"False alarm," I said. I tapped the off button on the phone, turned back to the action on the field, and contemplated whether the robbers could be male and female, or both female. It seemed possible but not likely. Although I had seen them only briefly, I had a sense of the movements and mannerisms of my assailants. I was pretty sure the robbers both were male.

Again, the cell phone rang and again I answered it quickly, drawing an annoyed glance from several sophomore females in front of me who had been talking and giggling since the game began.

"I see Ronnie and some other guy hangin' around outside the fence," Gary advised.

"Diner Ronnie?" I asked as I turned and scanned the perimeter of the fence until I spotted him and a shorter cohort.

"Yeah," Gary affirmed.

"Recognize the other guy?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "You?"

"Looks like a guy who graduated a year or two ago, but I can't be sure from here."

"Think you could wander down for a closer look?"

"Could," I said.

I turned off the cell, arose, and started descending the bleachers, much to the delight of the gaggle of gigglers.

As I approached the front gate from inside the fence, two guys who were approaching from the opposite side stopped, focused momentarily on me, then turned and walked away briskly.

"Damn," I mumbled as I fumbled for my cell phone and hurried through the gate.

"Got your stub?" the student manning the ticket booth shouted, but already I was running, trying to catch up with the two guys. I rushed to the parking lot, stopped, and scanned the multiple rows of cars, minivans, and trucks. No movement was apparent.

Within moments, Gary caught up with me, although I never had called him. My phone was still in my hand.

"I saw you take off runnin'," Gary said. "What's up?"

"I think I saw the two guys," I said.

"Where'd they go?"

"Don't know," I answered. "They disappeared."

"Did they make you?"

"Make me?" I chuckled and turned to Gary. "What is this, a cop show?" I paused. "Yeah, I think they knew who I was."

"But do you think they knew what you were doin' here?"

"You mean that I was here to 'make' them?"

Gary rolled his eyes. "Very funny," he allowed. "Well, did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Recognize them?"

"They were in shadow, but there was something about the way the shorter guy was standing—so upright, so . . ."

"But you don't know who they are," Gary said, more a statement than question.

"Right," I said.

"But you're sure it was them?"

"Pretty sure," I answered.

"So that leaves us where?"

I scanned the unlit area beyond the parking lot. "Still in the dark."

"The dual's with I.C." Gary said.

"What?" I asked, obviously puzzled.

"I.C.—Immaculate Conception High School," he said, his sarcasm apparent. "Only one of our biggest rivalries in the state."

"I know what I.C. stands for, but what's a duel—wrestlers with pistols at ten paces?"

"It's dual, d-u-a-l," he spelled.

"Which is what?"

"A wrestling match."

"Why don't they just call it that?"

"It's a wrestling term," he explained, as if that was sufficient.

"See. That's why I don't follow sports. You've got a dialect all your own."

"And you don't?" Gary countered. "What was that chess term you used the other day—feeno-setto or something?"

"Fianchetto," I corrected. "It refers to the strategic placement of a bishop . . . oh, never mind. Point taken."

"Strategic placement," Gary repeated. "That's what we need for the duals."

Gary explained the duals were an all-day affair that traditionally filled the gymnasium with a large crowd of students, parents, and boosters. This year's event was being hosted by our school. Gary concluded the available cash would be irresistible for our robbers.

So once again, we plotted.

I arose early that Saturday in early November and stationed

myself at my appointed post—a hallway around the corner from where the money was being collected. Although I couldn't see the ticket sales from my vantage point, I could hear every word.

After the initial bustle of student and adult wrestling fans, the hallways quieted. From beyond the closed gymnasium doors, the muffled sounds of cheers, shouts, and applause emanated.

I listened attentively until I heard the instructions being given to the student who was manning the ticket table. I hit the send button on my cell phone, waited about a minute, then peeked around the corner.

The chair at the ticket table was empty. The cashbox was missing.

I hurried to the nearest classroom and stood in the doorway.

"Hi," I said to the masked man who was duct-taping Albert's wrists behind his back. "Remember me?"

The man seemed momentarily startled. Then he snorted a contemptuous laugh. "What do think you're doin'?"

"I'm here to stop you," I said.

"Yeah," he countered. "You and what army?"

"This one," I said. I stepped inside the classroom to clear the doorway and, on cue, four other people funneled into the classroom. Three wore the red and black wrestling singlets denoting our high school colors.

Heavyweight Frank Sansone held the collar of a fourth man, who wore tan coveralls and now had duct tape over his mouth. His ski mask had been removed. In Frank's other hand was the cashbox.

"Hey, Gary," the masked man said. He pulled off the ski mask, and immediately I recognized Ryan Paulson and realized the shorter man was his tennis doubles partner. "Look, you can keep the money. Just let us—"

He was cut short when Gary stepped forward and put a take-down move on him. Ryan went down face-first and hit the floor—hard.

"That's for my mom," Gary said.

We heard the approaching sirens, and within minutes, the police I had summoned by cell phone arrived and took custody of Ryan and his partner.

After answering their questions and promising we would be available later to provide a complete statement, we began to disperse.

As some of the wrestlers started to leave, I thanked them for assisting with the plan Gary and I had hatched.

"We should be thanking you," Frank said. "This money's for the



wrestling program," he added, lifting the cashbox. "And anytime you want to sit at our table, you're welcome."

They departed, leaving Gary and me alone.

"I've got a match in an hour or so," Gary said.

I nodded.

He started for the door, then stopped and turned back. "Hey, Roland, when does your chess club meet?"

"Tuesday evenings in the library. Seven o'clock."

"Mind if I stop by sometime—learn some fundamentals?"

"Anytime." ♣

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## SOLOMON'S WEDDING

GIGI VERNON

**"L**ook!" Jonathan Solomon pulled his hands from his wife's eyes, revealing the gift.

"A blue Mercedes!"

"Your favorite color."

"I hate blue. Green's my favorite, silly." She fondled his tie, then pulled his lips to hers. "I don't know what's got into you lately."

Into him? Into her. She'd been acting odd ever since they'd renewed their vows.

They exchanged the Mercedes for a red convertible. He had to admit it complemented the short skirts, heels, and cleavage-baring tops that she'd taken to wearing. Could she be having a midlife crisis? At thirty?

He became used to returning home from work to parties, the driveway clogged with cars, the house stuffed with strangers shouting at each other over rock music, Victoria by the pool surrounded by men, a glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other. She'd never smoked before.

But then the sex hadn't been phenomenal before.

He expected her to ask for a divorce. Or maybe she'd simply clean out his accounts and vanish.

He didn't expect to open the door to the sheriff accompanied by a woman in a hospital gown, her eyes unfocused underneath a crewcut.

At sight of Victoria in the bikini and heels of a beauty pageant contestant, the crewcut woman's eyes blazed. She lunged and screamed, "Veronica!"

Suddenly recognizing his wife in the madwoman, Jonathan recoiled. "Victoria!"

"Mrs. Solomon," the sheriff said, "you're under arrest for bigamy, impersonating your identical twin, having her committed, fraud—"

Jonathan slammed the door, turned to Victoria, no Veronica, and shouted, "Run!"

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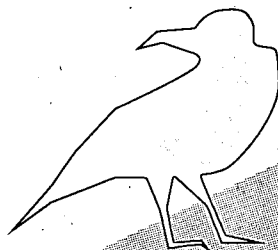
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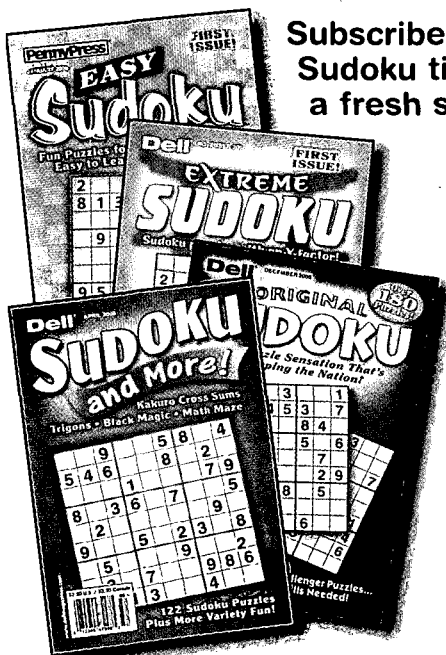
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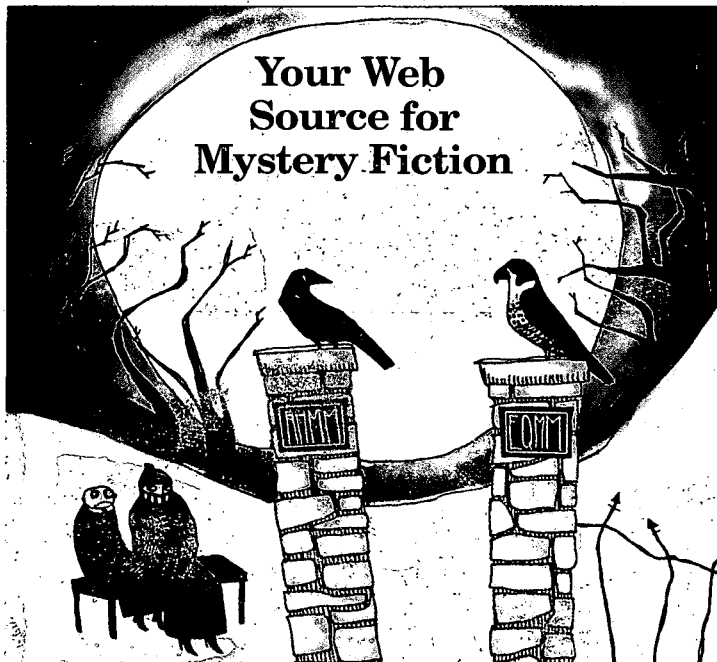
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